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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE, 1974
VOL. 35, NO. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

WHO KILLED BABY SISTER?

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The old man was obviously crazy, and unfortunately his family had never locked him up. After all, he was very wealthy, and was soon to be even wealthier; yet he had no control over his own money. His sister controlled everything. Everything but someone's murderous instinct. For Mike Shayne, the problem was to unravel the insane threads of a murder for which he was somehow accused!

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WHO KILLED BABY SISTER?

by BRETT HALLIDAY

It was a crazy case from the beginning, and was almost funny—except the old man was certain that he knew the murderer: he told the police Mike Shayne had done it for him!

IF THERE could be a male equivalent to the "little old lady in tennis shoes who only drives to church" this fellow could very well have been it.

He was small and frail and very old. Age showed in the delicate, lined skin of face and neck, the bony wrists and ankles and the way a once extremely expensive and fashionable suit hung loose on his dessicated bones.

He sat in the client's chair in the office of Mike Shayne, private detective, and looked as if the first breath of hot air passing the window from Flagler Street would blow him quite away like a thin curl of dust.

"Mr. Shayne," the ancient said in a voice surprisingly

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COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

strong for one so frail, "I will pay you the sum of ten thousand dollars to kill my baby sister."

That was a shocker even for big Mike Shayne, case hardened as he was by years of practicing his profession on the turbulent Florida Gold Coast. It just wasn't logical. He'd as soon expect one of the plaster saints over at Gesu Church to step out of its niche and offer to peddle a handful of dirty post cards.

He could see that his attractive secretary and right-hand-woman, Lucy Hamilton was equally startled. She didn't turn away from her typewriter, but Shayne could see her back stiffen even across the office.

The big detective glanced at the page of notes Lucy Hamilton had made when she interviewed the caller before he had come in. "Mr. Pentworth, I'm not sure that I heard you correctly."

"Oh yes," the little man said with some asperity. "You heard me right. I said I'd give you ten thousand dollars to kill my sister. That's what I said, and it's what I meant. I have the ten thousand dollars too." He tapped the breast pocket of his worn suit jacket.

"It's right here in new bills I got at the bank this very morning. You don't have to worry about being paid your money, Mr. Shayne. I've heard you are a man of your word so I'm even willing to pay you in advance."

"Now see here, Mr. Pentworth, I'm not in the least worried about being paid," he put up his hand. With relief he noticed that Lucy Hamilton caught his signal. She reached for the telephone console and quietly began dialing.

Count on Lucy, he thought with a pleased grin, knowing she would call Pentworth's family to tell them where he was. Failing that, Shayne would have to call the county boys to remove the old fool.

"That's fine. It's settled then," the old man was saying.

"That isn't what I mean," Shayne said. "You've made a mistake. I don't take contracts to murder people."

"Nonsense," Howard Pentworth snapped. "Of course you do. All you privileged eyes do. I'm Howard Pentworth and I read all the books about you people. You do everything for money and even my father would agree I've offered you plenty of money."

"No you haven't," the big redheaded private detective told him.

"I don't see any other way than to kill Lydia."

"If you told me all the facts, I might be able to find a way," Shayne said, stalling as Lucy

completed the call. "First I have to know what it's all about. Start at the beginning and bring me up to date. Then I can decide what to tell you."

"The beginning is almost a hundred years back," Pentworth said. "I'm ninety-one years old and Lydia is almost eighty. That's too far. Anyway the important part is when father died forty years ago. Lydia was alone with him in the big house that year. Snuggling up to him. A woman's wiles. You know what I mean, Shayne?"

"I've heard of such things," Shayne said. Over at the other desk Lucy Hamilton had her back to them but he could see her head nodding as she talked quietly on the telephone.

"Woman's wiles," Pentworth repeated. "Twisted him right round her little finger. She was a cute one back then. Baby sister, bah! Anyway he thought she was the only one of the family that loved him. In his will he left her absolute control of all the money. While she lived she was to provide for us, but that was all. I, for instance, haven't had a cent in forty years but what she doled out. Do you see?"

Shayne saw. He wondered why the man had never tried to get a job or make himself some money, but he didn't ask.

"Every cent," Pentworth said. "I had to *beg* her for every cent. As long as she lives. And I'm getting old. I'm afraid she'll outlive me."

"If she dies?" the big man asked.

"Then the money comes to the other heirs. Then we are free for the first time since father died. Free from baby sister's whims and domination. I tell you I'm desparate. You can see that can't you, Mr. Shayne?"

"Couldn't you go to law to force a division of the estate?" Shayne asked. He saw Lucy hang up. With thumb touching forefinger, she gave him an "O.K." sign.

"We tried that thirty-five years ago. Father had the best lawyers in town. We couldn't break the Will. We were fools to try. She's taunted us with

our failure ever since. There's no way out but to kill her. Please, Mr. Shayne. Please."

"I told you that's out of the question," Shayne said.

"Won't you take the case?" the old man asked? "For ten thousand dollars?"

"I'm sorry," Shayne said. "Not even for Fort Knox. I don't do that sort of work. What you need is an attorney, and your sister might need a psychiatrist."

"She has a psychiatrist," Howard Pentworth said. "He wants to kill her too." He got up and left the office before Shayne could respond.

"We get all kinds," Lucy Hamilton said, coming in to the office. "I called his home number. His brother answered. Said to just ignore Old Howard. He always goes home after such tirades."

Shayne snorted. "Some home," he said, reaching for the morning mail, then added, "and some tirade."

II

THE PENTWORTH mansion looked like a vast English country house and must have had at least thirty rooms. It was in the older northeast side of Miami known as the Morningside area and sat on a lot of at least two immensely valuable acres.

A servant opened the door to Howard Pentworth. "Has Miss Lydia come down yet?" the old man asked.

"Not yet, Mr. Howard, sir. Do you want me to call her?"

"Don't bother," Pentworth said. "I'll go on up to her sitting room."

He went up a winding stairway to the second floor and then to the front of the house. Pentworth knocked on a door, then pushed it open when there was no answer. The sitting room inside was empty. The old man pushed open another door which led to the bedroom.

Lydia, his sister, was on the bed. Her dressing gown and the elaborate bedspread were covered with pools of blood, some of which hadn't completely dried as yet. She had been shot twice, through the chest and head.

She was very dead indeed.

Howard Pentworth went downstairs to the phone in the study. He called the Miami Police.

"I want to report a murder," he said.

"Who is this?" the desk sergeant asked. "Who was murdered?"

Howard Pentworth gave his name and address. "My sister was murdered," he said. "You don't have to come up here, though. I already know who

killed her. It was a private detective named Michael Shayne." He hung up the phone.

The desk sergeant said: "My God." He knew Mike Shayne as a longtime personal friend of Police Chief Will Gentry. He rang up the Chief's office.

Sixty seconds later Will Gentry had Mike Shayne on the phone. Two minutes later he was saying: "I know you didn't do it, Mike, but you better get on up to the house anyway. God knows what an old fool like that will say next. Meet me there."

"I'll be there," Shayne said.

He made it in record time, but the City of Miami Police Force is highly efficient. Detectives, lab men and an assistant to the coroner were at the Pentworth mansion within fifteen minutes of the time the body was discovered. A good ten minutes before Shayne arrived.

Chief Will Gentry himself had been in the first car with the detectives from the Homicide Squad. The men from the force went to work with swift professional skill.

"We have the murder weapon," one of them told the Chief and Mike Shayne. "That is, if this was a murder."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gentry said.

"It might have been a suicide is what I mean," the man said. "We found the gun in the hand of the dead woman. She was holding it in her right hand. If it isn't a case of suicide, then how about that?"

"I can tell how about that," Gentry snapped. "You could too. That body was shot twice. Once through the right temple into the head and a second time that looks like dead center through the heart. Either shot would be instantly fatal. Ask Jensen over there from the coroner's office.

"The dead woman couldn't possibly have fired both those shots into herself. In the first place she wouldn't have needed to. In the second place it would have been impossible physically. A dead woman can't shift the gun to another part of her body and then pull the trigger."

The detective said, "Oh."

Mike Shayne had been examining the body on the bed along with the coroner's assistant. Now he called out: "Come over here a minute, Will."

When the Chief joined him, Shayne continued in a lower tone. "There's something funny here, Will. Look at her hand again. Frail and soft and well cared for, but you see those marks there? See the skin broken a trifle between the thumb and first finger where

the recoil of a fired gun would have hit her? See those faint marks on the hand? I'll bet a roll that when the lab checks they'll find those are powder stains."

"In other words," Chief Gentry said to his redheaded friend, "we've got a new twist on the locked room mystery. The room's unlocked but the corpse shot itself twice with either shot being instantly fatal. Yet the evidence says this old woman did what it's humanly impossible to do."

"Well," said the excited voice of Howard Pentworth, coming up to them. "Why don't you listen to me? There isn't any mystery here. This man Shayne killed baby Lydia. I paid him to do it. I'm a little sorry now that I did. Of course I didn't know it would be so. . .uh. . .messy as that. Still I have to say he gives wonderful service. Just wonderful. No sooner said than done."

Chief Gentry turned to his friend. "What is this all about anyway, Mike? He's been telling all the boys he gave you the contract to kill this old woman, and that you did it."

"He tried," Shayne said. "He walked into my office and offered me ten big ones to kill her. I turned him down flat. My only worry was that he'd escaped from some institution. But Lucy checked him out. She talked with his brother, but Howard here left before we could do anything else."

"That's an outrage," Howard Pentworth bristled at them both. "I only buy the best and everybody knows Mike Shayne is the best in this town. Besides anybody can see she commited suicide."

Gentry ignored the old man's contradictions. "So he came in and found her like this."

"Right."

"Maybe I should lock up the brother here on suspicion. . .or more likely for his own protection."

"Don't you dare," Pentworth said. "I don't need protection. I hired Shayne to protect me and he's the best in town. As long as he works for me, he'll take care of me. I don't want the disgrace of police around the house."

Mike Shayne pulled Will Gentry aside where Howard Pentworth couldn't overhear. "Why don't you leave it at that, Will? As long as the old boy figures I'm guarding him, I can stay here and look into this thing. Don't worry, I really will guard him anyway."

"This is a police case, Mike," Gentry said. "If I let you start messing around who knows what it will turn into."

"If you don't, you're going to

have to lock the old boy up and there goes your best lead," Shayne pointed out. "Besides I've got a stake in this case. If he goes on yelling that I killed the old woman somebody might believe him. Give me a couple of days, Will. I'll find out how a little old lady can do the impossible and shoot herself fatally twice."

"I don't know."

"Well, make up your mind. You heard him say I work for him. What more do you want? You want him to bring in his family lawyers? You know you can't hold a man with the money this one's got."

They left it at that for the moment.

III

WHILE THE police had been investigating the murder room, detectives had been rounding up the servants and other members of the family who had been at home during the morning. They were now undergoing routine questioning by Homicide detectives in the big drawing room on the ground floor.

Will Gentry and Mike Shayne went down to look them over.

The four servants, cook, butler, housemaid and gardener, were all elderly and had been working for the family for at least twenty years. They were broken up and shocked by the death of their mistress.

It was nearly impossible to get a coherent statement out of them except that they had all been together in the kitchen at the approximate time of the shooting.

"One day a month," explained the old butler, "all the silver in this big house has to be washed and polished. Vases, picture frames, everything. It's a big job, sir. We take a full morning and all of us pitch in together. That's the only way we get it done. This was the morning."

"I see," Will Gentry said. Turning to Shayne, he added: "Wouldn't you know. An iron-clad alibi as long as they all stick to it."

Only two other members of the family had been at home. These were Howard's younger brother, by one year, Professor Jim Pentworth and his daughter Janice. Janice herself was at least sixty years of age. Her father had retired after many years teaching at a northern university. He was a pleasant, mild mannered old man and apparently in much better command of his wits than Howard of his. At least Jim Pentworth spoke calmly and reasonably at all times.

He and Janice had been reading and talking in the old fashioned pergola a short distance from the swimming pool at the other end of the garden from the house.

Their only interruption had been Lucy Hamilton's telephone call. Like the servants, they had heard no shots and seen no strangers on the estate.

"Not that it means much one way or the other," Jim Pentworth told Shayne and the Chief. "Someone could have come on the place or gotten into the front of the house easily enough without our noticing. I'm afraid we leave the doors unlocked most of the time as it is."

"Don't do that from now on," Gentry advised. "Killers have been known to return."

"Nonsense," Howard Pentworth said. "We'll be perfectly safe, Jim and Janice. I've engaged Mr. Shayne to stay in the house and protect us until this terrible business is settled. He's the best there is, you know."

Shayne noticed that the old man wasn't saying any more about hiring him to kill Lydia.

Shortly after that the coroner's people took the body away and the rest of the police departed with them.

Mike Shayne was alone in the house with the family and servants of the dead woman.

Howard Pentworth took him by the elbow at once. "Come on," he said. "We have to go right back up to Lydia's rooms."

"Why do we have to?" Mike Shayne said. "Better have a good long talk with you first. You could have gotten me into trouble with all that nonsense you had hired me to kill your sister."

"Nonsense is right," Pentworth said. "You know it's nonsense, I know it's nonsense and the chief knows it is nonsense. I said I investigated you before I came to you. I knew you two were friends."

"Then why say it?"

"Please, forget it, Mr. Shayne. I have something a great deal more important to show you now. Come on before someone else removes it."

Pentworth led Mike Shayne back up the stairs to Lydia's room on the front of the house.

"I noticed two things unusual," Pentworth said. "First of all look here."

He led Mike Shayne to the windows on the front of the house. They were open. All were the old fashioned, sash-hung type that pushed up and down.

"Look at this," Howard Pentworth said. All the windows were screened except one.

Pentworth pointed. There were scratches on the stone sill of the open window and the bougailnillea vines which covered the front of the house would have enabled anyone to climb up to the window from below.

"Where is the screen?" Shayne asked.

"It was broken years ago. She never had it replaced. I told you Lydia was off her rocker. Now come here."

He led Shayne to a writing desk against the wall of the room. On top of the desk was a pad of lilac notepaper bearing Lydia's monogram.

"That paper was never left anywhere but in the drawer," Pentworth said importantly. "It wouldn't be on top unless she took it out to write something."

"Write what?"

"A suicide note of course," Howard Pentworth said.

Mike Shayne stood perfectly still for a full minute looking at the excited little old man. Thoughts raced through his head.

"If she had written a suicide note it would have been found," he said finally. "The police went all over this room very carefully. They didn't find any note."

"They didn't find it because someone removed it before they got here," Pentworth insisted.

"I know baby sister. She would only take that paper out if she meant to write something. I know that."

"Yeah," Mike Shayne said. "But why a suicide note? Maybe it was a letter, or even a new Will. If it's gone, how will we know what she wrote?"

"That's for you to find out," Howard Pentworth snapped. "I'm not the detective."

"I may have missed something," the big detective said and ignored Pentworth's sarcasm, "but I doubt anyone would take a suicide note and hide or destroy it. A new Will I could understand. But a suicide note! Nobody would do a thing like that!"

"I would for one," Howard Pentworth told him. "Of course I didn't because I was in your office, but I might have done it if I was here. So would anyone else in the family. It would be a disgrace if a Pentworth commited suicide. I'd much rather have it thought that one of us was murdered."

"You can't mean that," Shayne said.

Pentworth looked confused.

"Of course I do. At least I think I do. It seems like the logical thing at the moment anyway. But she wouldn't have made a Will. She had one. Nobody needs two Wills."

Mike Shayne had almost reached a point where he could hardly tell when the little man meant what he said and when he didn't. If everything Howard Pentworth said was to be taken literally, the old man was badly in need of psychiatric care. Or outright commitment to a mental institution.

"I'm going up to get a nap and then dress for dinner," Pentworth announced. "The rest of the family will be here by then. At least I hope they've all been notified. If you want to rest, your room is at the end of the hall at the back of the house."

With that Pentworth left the room and literally trotted off down the hallway.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE took another quick look around the rooms which had been occupied by the late Lydia Pentworth. Except for the fact that the blood-stained sheets and coverlets had been removed from the bed and it had been remade, it was as the police had left it. The family and servants had been given strict orders to that effect.

A couple of uniformed officers had been posted at the front and rear of the estate to keep the family from being bothered by the Press, this in tribute to their great wealth. However neither of these officers could even be seen from the house.

Shayne checked the unscreened window again. Someone could have climbed the vines and gotten in that way. On the other hand there was no reason why anyone should. The doors to the big house weren't locked, nor was the door to Lydia's suite.

An intruder could have walked in and up the stairs, killed the old woman, and walked back out again without any trouble. There was nothing to stop him and none of the people in the thick walled house could have heard the shots.

Shayne looked again at the note pad to which Howard

Pentworth had called his attention. He picked up the pad and held it slantwise to the light coming in the window. If a note had been written on the pad and then torn off, some impressions might have been made on the sheet below which remained on the pad.

But there were no impressions legible enough to let him read even a word. There were a few very faint traces, but nothing coherent.

That didn't prove that nothing had been written on the pad that day. The paper was a high quality rag linen and the sheets were thick and heavy and moreover had a hard gloss finish. A woman as old as Lydia would write with a faint pressure and a delicate hand, leaving no impression.

Shayne left and walked down the hall to his own room, which he found without trouble. It was a large, comfortable corner room.

Shayne then went downstairs to a phone in a small study off the main entrance hall and called Lucy Hamilton. He briefly explained the situation and asked her to stop by his apartment hotel and pack an overnight bag with a few things he needed. She could drop it by the Pentworth mansion when she left the office that day.

He had scarcely gotten back to his room when there was a knock on the door. When he opened it, Professor James Pentworth was in the hallway.

"May I come in, Mr. Shayne? If possible I'd like a quiet word with you where no one can overhear us."

"Of course," Shayne said. "I was going to look you up myself in a few minutes. I'm sure you know what I'm doing here."

The old professor came in and shut the door behind him. It was a good solid oak door of a kind and quality not found in the newer houses. Pentworth shot the bolt from the inside, then walked over and took one of two easy chairs by the window looking into the garden. Shayne took the other chair.

"Chief Gentry told me who you are," the old man said. "I've known the Chief for years and trust his word. And of course I spoke with your secretary. Frankly I'm delighted to have you in the house. I'm afraid that whoever is responsible for Lydia's sad death won't be content to stop with her. I want to hire you personally to protect us and solve this terribly mystery."

Shayne nodded. "Your brother Howard has already hired me, but I'm glad to have you back it up. Howard isn't too stable."

Jim Pentworth smiled.

"You'll get used to. . .his peculiarities."

The detective wondered if he would. To the professor he said, "Who benefits by your sister's death?"

"That's simple enough," the Professor said. "The root of all evil is money again this time. The original trust funds our father set up will be dissolved and the money inherited directly. Considering the number of millions of dollars involved, it's only a wonder that something of this nature didn't happen years ago."

"You and your brother and daughter are the heirs?" Shayne asked.

"Among the heirs," the Professor told him. "There's Lydia's adopted son Lance, of course. Then there are Howard's twin grandchildren, Harry and Hetty. All of them have been called and are flying in from out of town in time for a late dinner tonight. You'll meet them then. Also, there's Doctor Kavalas."

"Doctor Kavalas?" Shayne said. "Who's he?"

"Why, Lydia and Howard's psychiatrist. I thought surely Howard mentioned him. Didn't I tell your secretary? Maybe not. Anyway, you must have known that Howard had a psychiatrist."

"I guessed he might," the big man said. "I didn't know for certain till you spoke just now. Is he an heir too?"

"I think so," the Professor said. "He's been about everything else the last couple of years."

The afternoon sun shining in the window struck Mike Shayne full in the face as it came out from behind a cloud. Involuntarily he moved his head. It was a fortunate movement.

The small calibre, high velocity rifle bullet punched a neat round hole in the expensive screening of the window, passing within three inches of Mike Shayne's face, and burying itself in the opposite wall.

Mike Shayne was out of his chair with reflexes so fast they would have put to shame those of an Everglades cougar. He got himself out of range of the window and pulled the Professor's chair with the old man still seated in it after him.

The professor said: "What on earth?" but he didn't shout or jump up. Mike Shayne was surprised how Pentworth had retained his poise. His respect for the old fellow went up several points.

He pointed to the window and the wall.

James Pentworth said, "My God, Mr. Shayne, there's an assassin on the grounds. Aren't

you going to go after him?"

"In all that ornamental planting out there he could stay hidden and bushwack me," Shayne said. "I'll go out after a while and take a look around, but I'll do it my way on my own terms. As long as we stay away from the line of sight of the windows, we're all safe enough. When you return to your own rooms, you and your daughter better draw the blinds or drapes too. And don't go out on the grounds unless I'm with you."

"I agree," the Professor said. "I'd better get back to Janice at once and look after her."

"Just one more question before you go," Shayne said. "Is your brother Howard capable of killing?"

The old Professor looked Mike Shayne straight in the eyes as he answered: "I don't think so. I honestly don't. Howard is. . .uh. . .somewhat erratic as you've observed, but to kill one of his own blood? He has too much family pride. I don't think he's capable of that."

"Somebody around here is," Shayne said.

Mike Shayne stayed in his room only a few minutes after Professor Pentworth had left. Then the big man went down the servants' stairway and out a rear door to the building.

The grounds were lushly planted except where a detached garage, utility sheds and a slat house for raising orchids and table flowers occupied one corner behind giant clumps of bamboo. Heavy ornamental shrubbery masked even the swimming pool.

In spite of all this the property wasn't fenced. There was a low stone wall on the boundaries, but a child could scramble over it.

Shayne already had a pretty good idea of the area to look for. Before leaving his room he had pried the little bullet out of the lathe and plaster wall. He'd sighted from that hole through the break in the expensive heavy copper screening. The line of sight had pointed to a heavy clump of shrubs and mahogany trees.

He found marks in the soft earth where someone had stood for a considerable time inside that very clump of shrubs.

"Waiting for the sun to shine into that room and pick me out for him," Shayne told himself.

He also found the clear impression made by a rifle butt. The sniper had set the butt on the ground and leaned on the muzzle while he or she waited.

A spent cartridge case lay where it had been ejected from the gun after being fired. The calibre was .22 Hornet, a high velocity 'varmint' cartridge that

had been popular well before World War Two.

"Everything's old in this place," Shayne mused. "Even the guns they use."

The big man tried to track the sniper from the point of ambush. In all that planting and tangle it was an impossible job for anyone but an Apache, and Shayne didn't try very hard.

Someone had tried to kill him once, and the assassin would try again, but Mike Shayne would be ready the next time.

V

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE returned to the house itself he found all the servants together in the kitchen, nominally preparing for a late dinner but actually talking together in low tones about the events of the day.

The detective didn't try to question them. Servants who had been in the family for years would do anything to avoid incriminating one of the household. He was particularly sure none of them would talk while the others could overhear.

He did speak to the butler however. "You were told who I am and what I'm doing here. I'll expect full cooperation from all of you."

"Oh yes," the man said. "Yes indeed, sir."

"Well then, let's start immediately," Shayne said. "Chief Gentry told you to keep the doors to this house locked. Yet in the last half hour I've gone out and in again through separate unlocked doors."

"I'm sorry, sir," the man said. "It won't happen again, sir. I assure you."

"There's a killer on the loose on this property," the big man said. "I am sure he's not after any one of the four of you, but you can't afford to be careless about leaving doors and windows open. I know the killer type and if this one does get in and you blunder on him you've had it. He'll kill you like stepping on a roach to avoid being recognized."

None of the servants said anything, but Shayne could see by their faces that they hadn't even considered the possibility of danger to themselves. They would probably be careful to lock up in the future.

He was leaving the kitchen when the front doorbell rang. The butler went out in the hall to answer, and Mike Shayne watched him walk along the hall.

It might be Lucy Hamilton bringing him the overnight things he had asked for.

It wasn't.

When the butler swung open the big doors there were two young people standing on the step holding airline flight bags in their hands.

Like everyone else Mike Shayne had met in this huge house these were striking personalities, more so because they were the first young people he'd seen so far in the case.

Apparently the butler was speaking about the detective because the two on the doorstep set down their bags and came quickly down the hall to where Shayne was standing.

The young man, who was in the lead, put out his hand. He had the firm strong grip of an athlete. "Mike Shayne?" he said. "The well-known Mike Shayne, private detective! Hibbs just told us it was you. We're delighted to find you here."

Shayne returned the handshake. He instinctively liked the young man.

"I'm Harry Pentworth," the youngster said, "and this is my sister Hetty. We're Howard's grandchildren."

Shayne turned to shake hands with the sister.

Both were blond and blue eyed, tall and slender and moving with a natural ease and grace. Harry was a little the taller, broad shouldered, narrow hipped and tanned. He wore an expensive, conservatively cut business suit and a heavy gold signet ring on his right hand.

Hetty was an inch shorter, hair to her shoulders, curved in all the right places and sparkling with the health and ebullience of youth. She wore heavy makeup and a perfume that spelled Paris with every whiff.

When she took Shayne's hand she held it and let her long, warm fingers curl around his. "A man," she said in a low throaty voice that could have belonged to a much older woman. "A big man. Wonderful. You'll have to come and see me tonight. Very late. When all the others have gone to bed." Her eyes were all invitation.

Howard Pentworth's grand-

daughter, alright, Shayne thought.

"Hetty," her brother said. "This is no time for talk like that, with poor great-aunt Lydia lying dead upstairs. You're putting Mr. Shayne on."

"Nonsense," Hetty said. "The police will have the body by now. I mean it, great big man. Come see me tonight—and if you please me very much, I'll tell you who killed Hetty."

For a moment there was stunned silence in the hall of the big house. Even the butler who had stooped to pick up the two bags remained frozen in his bent over position.

Mike Shayne said quietly, "If you know that, Hetty, I think you'd better tell me right now."

It was young Harry who answered. "Oh, come off it, Hetty. This is no time for nonsense. She's pulling your leg, Shayne. Of course she doesn't know anything of the kind."

The butler straightened up then and started for the big winding stairway. As he passed the three others he said, "I'll put the bags in your usual rooms."

"There's more luggage out on the steps," Harry said.

Hetty kept on looking at Mike Shayne. "Harry says I'm joking," she said to the detective. "You'll have to decide for yourself whether I am or not. The only way you can do that is to come to my room tonight. Try me and see."

Her brother caught her arm. "This is no time for that behavior," he said. "You'll have to excuse her, Mr. Shayne. Sometimes I think everybody in this family is crazy."

"Except himself of course," Hetty said. "Don't forget, big man. Come up and see me." Then she let her brother take her arm and half help, half push her up the stairs.

Mike Shayne went back up to his own room and carefully locked the door before stretching out on the big four-poster bed for a rest. It was a huge, old fashioned bed.

"For once I've got a bed that fits me," the redhead told himself. It wasn't often that he enjoyed the feeling and he meant to make the most of it as long as he stayed in the house.

Three quarters of an hour later the butler knocked on Shayne's door. When the big redhead opened it, Lucy Hamilton was in the hall with the servant.

Shayne took the bag the servant was carrying and motioned Lucy into the room. He closed and locked the door after watching Hibbs head for the service stairs at the back of the house.

"How goes it, Michael?" Lucy

Hamilton asked. "Have you turned up anything since morning?"

"Nothing," Shayne said. He decided not to tell Lucy that someone had taken a shot at him. It would worry her. He went over and drew the drapes on all the windows and turned on a lamp at the bedside table.

"Angel," he said, "this is about as screwy a case as I've ever had. Everyone in this house is nuts except maybe for the old Professor. You tell that to Will Gentry when you call him."

"Is it really that bad?"

"It's worse. Everytime I open the door I almost expect to see a giant white rabbit with a top hat standing on the other side or chasing the Queen of Hearts up the stairs."

"Maybe we could file it as the Alice in Wonderland murder case," Lucy Hamilton smiled.

"Only so far we don't have an Alice," Shayne said, "though we've got the rest of it. On the other hand, the rest of the family should be here at dinner tonight. You give Will Gentry the list of names and ask him if he ran a check on them. He can call me here if anything comes up that I should know about."

"That reminds me Michael," she said. "Will said to tell you that you were right about the lab finding powder flecks on the old lady's hand. It certainly looks like she fired that gun at least once."

"Once is all," Shayne said. "Not even Houdini could have shot himself twice in the places she was shot. You go along now, and I'll keep in touch."

VI

MIKE SHAYNE shaved and took a long hot shower. Dinner wasn't till eight so he had plenty of time. A clean shirt and a dark striped necktie were his only concessions to formal dress, and he was ready well in advance of the dinner hour.

He decided to go downstairs and mingle with the family. Before leaving he closed and latched all the windows, locked the room door from the hall side and put the key in his pocket.

The big forty-five Colt's that Shayne preferred would have been too conspicuous even under his jacket so Shayne left it in his bag. He did wear a snub-nosed thirty-eight in a small holster that clipped over his belt.

As he came down the stairs to the ground floor landing Shayne heard voices and the clink of ice in tall glasses. Hibbs was serving drinks in the forty- by forty-foot living room.

Howard and James Pentworth were both in tuxedos and Janice had put on an evening dress. Harry and Hetty were more informally dressed, much to Shayne's relief.

They both wore white linen jackets and black slacks and soft black kid shoes. Harry had a white turtle neck sweater under his jacket.

Hetty had on a white see-through blouse that was about one degree more see-through than anything Mike Shayne had seen in a long time. What was under the blouse was very much worth being seen.

There were two other men in the big room whom Mike Shayne hadn't seen before.

Howard Pentworth as the senior member of this group of ancients bustled over to take Mike Shayne's arm and introduce him to the newcomers.

"These are the last members of our little family group," he told the detective. "They arrived together a few moments before you came downstairs."

The first man to be introduced was the dead Lydia's adopted son, Lance Pentworth. Lance was in his mid-fifties as far as Shayne could judge. He wore a dark business suit which must have come from the cutting room of an exclusive British Bond Street tailor. His solid gold cuff links held diamonds of about two carat weight. Everything about the man spoke of money and, surprisingly for this family, of aggressive intelligence.

"Lance was always Lydia's favorite, of course," Howard Pentworth said. "She gave him everything he wanted. Staked him in business, and he went on to make a fortune of his own. The only one of us rich enough in his own right not to care if Lydia lived or died." There was a touch of malice in the old man's voice.

Lance Pentworth took Mike Shayne's hand and gave it a firm shake. "Rich enough not to care perhaps," he said to them both, "but certainly not callous enough. Poor Lydia. She was a wonderful woman."

"Of course," Howard Pentworth said in one of his sudden changes of mood. "Of course she was wonderful. All of the Pentworths are wonderful people. It runs in the blood."

He paused for a moment as if in thought and then continued: "In the blood, yes. All of the blood Pentworths are wonderful people. Even poor Lydia."

Mike Shayne saw the muscle tighten along Lance Pentworth's jaw. Evidently the reference to Pentworth by blood had been aimed at the man, and not for the first time either, Shayne judged. Lance

kept silent however. He and Howard stood there in eyeball confrontation.

"How alike they look," Shayne thought, and then realized that the younger man was indeed almost a mirror image of what old Howard must have been some four decades back.

Was it coincidence? Shayne made a mental note to find out. For the moment however, Howard Pentworth was leading him over to the second newcomer.

"This is our oldest family friend, counselor and guide in matters of health and emotion," he told Shayne. "Morton, this is the detective, Mr. Shayne, we were talking about. Mr. Shayne, this is Doctor Morton Kavalas. He's both an M.D. and a psychiatrist. Of late years Lydia never made a move without first getting his advice. Not a single move, which is very possibly why she never once asked my advice, let alone took it."

"I'm afraid that Howard exaggerated my influence with his sister," Doctor Kavalas said as he shook hands with Shayne. Kavalas was dark haired and dark eyed in tribute to his Cypriot ancestry and a good five inches shorter than the Miami detective. His face was thin and sensitive, with alert eyes and a cynical twist to the rather thick lipped mouth. He was beginning to lose his hair.

"Lydia had a mind of her own," Kavalas continued. "A keen mind and a will of iron. For a woman of her years she had a remarkable grasp of all that went on around her."

"Tell me, Doctor, was she capable of suicide?" Shayne asked.

"Capable?" the Doctor mused. "Under certain circumstances I suppose anyone could be capable of that. Even Lydia. If you mean do I think that she killed herself this morning, as I suppose you do, then my answer would have to be no. It would take extraordinary pressures to drive Lydia Pentworth to kill herself, and I don't believe any such pressures existed at this time. Of course I may be wrong, but I'm almost positive I would have known if she had been on the verge of such a drastic and necessarily final act of self-destruction."

Just at that point the butler announced that dinner was served.

Mike Shayne would have liked a further word with Doctor Kavalas, but he found himself seated between Professor James Pentworth and Hetty. Hetty Pentworth had obviously had several cocktails before the

meal and was feeling the effects. Her face was flushed and her eyes a trifle moist and blurred. She kept the butler, Hibbs, busy refilling the wine glass at her place.

Shayne turned to the Professor. "I neglected to ask you this afternoon, Are any of the family interested in shooting as a sport?"

"Only Lance," the Professor said. "He has medals and as a boy he was death on the woodchucks on our northern properties. I'm afraid none of the rest of us even own a gun."

About the time Lance Pentworth had been a boy the .22 Hornet had been a popular calibre for shooting woodchuck and other varmints.

Shayne would have asked if Lance Pentworth had kept up with his shooting in recent years, but he didn't get the chance.

Hetty Pentworth had pressed the calf of her right leg against his left and was steadily increasing the pressure.

"Mike Shayne," she said, "look at me."

He had to turn to her. "You're a simply tremendous big hunk of man, Mike Shayne," the young woman said.

Her white jacket had fallen open and it was now obvious to the redhead that there was nothing whatever under the see-through blouse but Hetty herself.

"I really did mean it, big man," she said in a low tone of voice in his ear. "You come on up to my room after this ghastly meal, and we can have lots of fun together."

"Aren't you forgetting that I've been hired to do a job in this house?" Shayne asked her as diplomatically as he could.

"No I'm not," she said in her husky, sexy voice. "Of course I'm not, but that job includes protecting me, and as long as I know what I know, I'm in danger. So you better not let me out of your sight. In fact don't even let me out of your reach."

"You're only in danger as long as you keep what you know or think you know a secret," Shayne said. "Have you thought of it that way? Tell me or the police, and there isn't any reason to shut your mouth any longer."

"Let's do it my way, Mike Shayne. You come to my room tonight and I promise before you leave I'll tell you who killed Lydia."

It was one of those moments everyone has experienced when, for no discernable reason, all the conversation in a room comes to a sudden and complete halt.

The last sentence that Hetty Pentworth had spoken burst into that silence like a bombshell.

"And I promise before you leave I'll tell you who killed Lydia."

The people seated around the long table looked at each other with suddenly veiled and suspicious eyes while the silence dragged on.

Only Hetty herself was drunk enough to ignore the effect her words had had. "Come on, Mike," she said in a low voice. "Promise me you'll. . ."

Then she saw everyone was watching her and broke off in mid sentence and silence. To cover the moment she held up her wine glass for Hibbs to refill.

The first to speak was Doctor Kavalas seated across from Hetty and towards the end of the table.

"Surely my dear," he said in his best controlled professional tones, "if you have any such information to impart, you should tell us all here and now. Don't you agree, Mr. Shayne?"

"That's what I was telling Hetty," Shayne said.

The girl looked from face to face all around the table. Then she gave a brittle laugh. "Oh nonsense. Aunt Lydia killed herself I suppose. I was simply making conversation with this

big sphinx sitting beside me here. I suppose it was bad taste, and I apologize."

She sat for another moment looking at all of them in turn before adding, "After all how could I know anything about Aunt Lydia's death. Harry and I were both back on Long Island when it happened."

Only old Howard Pentworth took up the challenge. "Don't be coy my dear. You know who killed Lydia. We all do. I paid Mike Shayne ten thousand dollars to do it and he earned his money. All of us know that."

James Pentworth looked flustered for the first time since Mike Shayne had met him. "Shut up you idiot," he said. Then to the big detective, "I apologize for my brother. In the

family we're used to his little jokes. I'm afraid the wine must have gone to his head."

"No need for an apology," Mike Shayne assured them. "It's been a rough day for all of us."

After a moment general conversation resumed in low tones.

VII

AT THE END of the meal Mike Shayne took Hetty Pentworth by the elbow. "Let's go some place where we can talk privately." He took her elbow and started to steer her away from the living room into the library.

She gave him a warm look that positively sizzled with emotion. "My room then. It's the only place we can be sure of being alone."

"I don't want to be overheard," Shayne said. "Don't you realize the danger you're in? If there's a killer in this group he has you marked after that fool talk at the table. You have to tell me what you know, and in a hurry. If you don't I can't guarantee to protect you."

She pulled her arm loose from his grasp. "All right," she said, pettishly, "but I won't talk down here. It's in my room or not at all." She started for the stairs.

Mike Shayne followed her. He knew that at least some of the others in the living room noticed them go, but there wasn't anything he could do to prevent that.

Hetty's room was at the far end of the second floor hall from Mike Shayne's. She led the way, walking fast but not forgetting to give a provocative swing to her hips as she went.

"That one will try to make some man at her own funeral," the big redhead thought.

Once inside her room Hetty Pentworth locked the door from the inside. She took the key out of the lock and carried it across the room to drop on a small night table by the head of the king-size bed. The room was dimly illuminated by a small lamp which was lit on one end of a big, solid mahogany antique dresser.

Shayne noted that the drapes had been pulled tightly across the windows so that no one could see into the room from the grounds. At least Hetty Pentworth had had sense enough to take that precaution.

Hetty turned, standing by the bed, and held out her arms in invitation.

Mike Shayne stayed where he was.

She dropped her arms. "You're not exactly the most eager lover in the world are you?" she said. "Well okay. I

guess you've got to be professional. It's what you're here for. Anyway come and give me one real kiss. Then I'll tell you what I know. It'll be worth your while."

Shayne wondered whether she meant the kiss or the information. By now he was half inclined to believe that she had been teasing him and really didn't know a thing. He decided to call her bluff.

He crossed the room, took her in his arms, and kissed her.

It wasn't a brotherly kiss, but Shayne was unprepared for the reaction. Her lips suddenly became hot and hungry and passionate and her body pressed against his.

Then he heard the barest whisper of sound behind his back and his ears identified it as danger.

Mike Shayne reacted with speed and sureness.

His left hand caught Hetty's shoulder and tore her away from him, hurling her on her back on the big bed. At the same time Shayne was turning and dropping to his knee as the right hand plucked his thirty-eight from its belt holster. As he spun around he heard a shot and the slug passed over his head.

The door to the hallway, which Shayne had seen Hetty Pentworth lock, was partly open. A hand was poked into the room holding a revolver. As he saw this the gun was fired again and the second shot went wild.

Shayne squeezed off a shot from his thirty-eight. He didn't think he hit anything, but the gun was pulled back into the hall, the door was closed, and he heard running feet.

Mike Shayne was across the room in a flash. To his surprise the door to the hall was locked when he reached it. Whoever had fired the shots must have opened the door with a pass key and relocked it when he fled.

Hetty Pentworth was sitting up on the edge of the bed. Her face was a study in mingled passion, excitement and fear, but to give the girl credit she wasn't screaming, and she kept her wits about her.

She snatched her own room key off the top of the little night table by the bed and tossed it to Shayne.

By the time he got the door unlocked the hall outside was empty.

Shayne went back into the bedroom and relocked the door. This time he left the key in the lock. While it was there no pass key could be inserted. Of course a burglar's thin plier could turn the key and push it out on the floor, but that would make a

noise that would alert the detective.

"Who else has a key to this room?" he asked Hetty.

"Hibbs has duplicates of every key in this house," she said. "Anybody could steal one, and I suppose somebody did." She paused for a moment. Then she said, "Well Mike, so much for the fun and games. I guess I'd better tell you what I know."

"Yes," Shayne said, "all of it, and start from the beginning. Somebody took you seriously at dinner and didn't waste any time trying to shut you up."

She said, "Thanks. You saved my life, I promise I won't forget."

"He probably wanted to kill both of us," Shayne said. "Now, tell me what you know."

"It isn't really all that much," she admitted. "Part of what I said was to get you up here. There is one thing though that I think you ought to know. Maybe it marks the killer and maybe it doesn't but it struck me as strange from the beginning. I hope it helps you."

"Go on," Mike Shayne said.

"It's this," Hetty Pentworth told him. "Harry and I and Lance are all supposed to have come in from New York today. Well I know about Harry and me. We were down at Southhampton for tennis this morning when we got the phone call from Great Uncle Jim. We drove up to Kennedy Airport together and took a plane down. You can check all that with the airline."

"The police will do that," Shayne said.

"Okay. Okay. But dear Uncle Lance didn't come down from New York this afternoon. I don't care what he says. Oh, he came down to Miami from New York all right, but in his case he made the trip yesterday and not today."

"That's interesting," Shayne said. He reached up to tug the left earlobe with thumb and finger. "How do you know and can you prove it?"

"Yes," she said. "I mean I can prove it and prove how I know. When Uncle Jim called this morning, I phoned Lance in New York City to see if he wanted to fly down with us. At least I tried to call him. His apartment didn't answer, so I tried his office down on Broad Street. His secretary said he flew down to Miami the afternoon before. She knew because she called the airline to reserve a seat for him."

"If he did that, wouldn't he have stayed here?" Shayne asked.

Hetty Pentworth shook her beautiful head. "Not if he could help it, he wouldn't have," she

said with conviction. "This place is like a museum or a tomb most of the time. Even Harry and I don't stay here unless it's a holiday or a family gathering or something serious like this. We have a place at the Jockey Club that the old folks here don't know about."

"Does Lance have a similar place?"

"I think so," she said, "but if he does I don't know where. Could be he puts up at one of the hotels here or over on the Beach when he comes down for a fun trip.

"Anyway I wanted you to know he was in town when Aunt Lydia died, and Harry and I weren't. It looks awfully funny to me that he hasn't come right out and said so."

"It looks strange to me too," Mike Shayne said. "I'd better look into this." He didn't tell Hetty what was in his mind. If one alibi was so easily broken, others could be. The thought sent a train of logical questions into motion.

"I guess you had," Hetty Pentworth said. "I can tell you right now, when somebody starts shooting at me its time for a real investigation. I don't like the idea of being killed."

"Nobody does," Shayne said. "Come on, we'll join the others."

The rest of the family were still in the downstairs living room when Shayne and Hetty Pentworth came down. All except the one man Shayne was looking for.

"Where's Lance?" he asked.

"Not here," Howard Pentworth said. "Anyone know where Lance went?"

"I think he left the house a while back," Doctor Kavalas said. "He told me at dinner there were things he had to see to in town this evening. I suppose part of it was arranging for the funeral of his mother."

"How did he go?" Shayne asked the Doctor.

"I'm not sure. We came together in my car from my home where we were talking earlier today after he flew in from New York. He didn't ask to borrow my car when he left so I suppose he took one of the cars from the garage here."

When Shayne and Hetty Pentworth inquired of the servants that proved to be the case. Lance Pentworth had asked for the keys to one of the family cars right after dinner. A car was gone from the garage.

"We know he's gone," Shayne said, "and we know how he left. But we don't know where he went."

"It's a big town," the girl said, "and he's been coming here for years. I suppose there's

a million places he could be. How are you going to find him?"

"I'll find him," the big man said grimly, "and I know this town better than any ten Lance Pentworths. First I must find a phone where I can make a few calls and be sure nobody will listen in on an extension. Is there a private line in the house?"

"No, but we're only a few blocks from the Jockey Club," Hetty said. "I told you Harry and I have a place we keep there. You can use the phone."

Shayne said, "Fine. Lets go."

VIII

THE JOCKEY CLUB in Miami isn't a bar or lounge and has nothing to do with people who ride race horses. It's a very expensive and exclusive hotel-apartment complex with its own yacht slips on Biscayne Bay and embodies the last word in Gold Coast luxury.

The Pentworth apartment was on an upper floor with a sweeping view across the bay to the sparkling lights of Miami Beach. Though only used a few days a year it was kept ready for occupancy at all times.

Hetty Pentworth let them in with a gold plated key, and Mike Shayne headed straight for the phone.

His first call was to Chief Will Gentry at headquarters. He reported the two attempts at shooting that afternoon and evening and asked some terse questions. None of which made sense to Hetty.

She knew only that they related to the family. The whereabouts of each member, plane schedules which were seemingly unrelated, and other items. It was obvious the detective was on to something. Shayne hung up.

"Gentry will call back," he said. "We'll wait here till he does. While we wait, you got anything to drink?"

She gestured at a movable bar in one corner of the living room. Mike Shayne found a bottle of his favorite French brandy and poured a tumbler almost full of the fiery liquor. He filled another tumbler with cold water from the kitchen tap for a chaser.

He was surprised that Hetty Pentworth didn't take advantage of their being alone to make any further advances. Apparently she'd begun to realize the seriousness of the occasion.

In about ten minutes, as Shayne finished his first glass of brandy, the phone rang. It was Will Gentry.

When he hung up the instrument Shayne was thought-

ful. Suddenly he turned to Hetty again. "We're off," he said. "Your Uncle Lance has a suite at the Glades Hotel in town. He rented it yesterday afternoon by the way, so you're right about his coming down here early. The clerk says he doesn't think he's been there this evening, but we'd better check anyway. Also the Chief gave me a list of Lance's usual hangouts in Miami." He didn't mention the other information the Chief had passed on to him.

They left The Jockey Club, and drove quickly to the Glades. Mike Shayne used the authority of his well-known long-standing friendship with Chief Gentry to persuade the clerk to let them into the suite registered to Lance Pentworth.

The man he was looking for wasn't there. There were signs that he might have been in and out briefly. The towels and face cloth in the bath were still damp from recent use.

"He could have been here without my knowing," the clerk admitted. "He doesn't turn in his key when he goes out."

There was no sign of anything being missing from the room. Lance's clothes were still in the dresser and the closet. Everything pointed to his intention to return.

In spite of that Shayne decided to go out and continue to

search around town. "We'll check the list of places Will Gentry gave me. If Uncle Lance wants to set up an alibi he may be in one of them."

Uncle Lance wasn't.

Two hours and a dozen assorted night clubs and gambling rooms later even Mike Shayne was ready to call it quits for the moment.

"We'll go back to the Glades," he said, "and wait in Lance's rooms. You can call your brother Harry to let us know if he shows up back at the big house again. Sooner or later

he's bound to show himself at one place or the other."

At the hotel the clerk shook his head. "I haven't seen him come in, but of course he didn't have to stop at the desk. Here's a pass key. You two go on up and wait if you like."

Apparently Lance Pentworth had used the back stairs when he came in. They found him stretched out, fully clothed, on the bed in the hotel suite. A scrap of paper was in his hand. Shayne recognized the thick quality of the paper. He gave the body a startled glance.

Someone had shot Lance twice, through the head and the heart, with a thirty-eight calibre pistol.

He was very bloody and very dead.

There was no gun in the room. Lance Pentworth had been, as the news media would shortly report, "shot to death by a person or persons unknown."

Mike Shayne got on the phone to Chief Gentry, and in a few tense minutes told him where he was and about the murder of Lance Pentworth. "You'll want your boys over here right away," he said, "and while you're about it, better put guards back outside the Pentworth mansion. You could get away with hinting at suicide to the press this morning and keeping them off, but this is Murder One. They'll want to talk to the whole family."

When he hung up after talking to the Chief, Mike Shayne called the Pentworth home.

The phone was answered by Professor Pentworth. "Mr. Shayne? Where are you? Most everyone has gone to bed, but I've been sitting up waiting for you and Hetty and Lance to come in."

"Lance won't be coming," Shayne said. He explained what had happened.

"Oh my God," the professor said. "One tragedy after another."

"I know," Shayne said. "The press will be trying to storm your house as soon as this gets out. I've asked for police guards, but be sure no one gets in until they get there. Hetty is with me and we'll be back soon."

"Thank God she's alright."

"Also, wake the others and get them together in the living room," Shayne said. "Don't let them out of your sight. The servants too. Now, has anyone else left the house?"

"Doctor Kavalas went home of course," Professor Jim said. "And young Harry left soon after you did. He said he thought he knew where Hetty had taken you, and he wanted to find you before anything out

of the way happened. I'm afraid the boy has a rather suspicious and prurient mind, Mr. Shayne. Did he find you?"

"No, he didn't," Mike Shayne said. "We were on the move most of the evening so I'm not surprised. If you hear from him, tell him to come back to the house right away. If not, we'll have the police look for him.

"Also call Doctor Kavalas and ask him to come back to the house. I'll want to talk to all of you as soon as Hetty and I get there."

The pieces were falling into place now, swiftly and surely. With Lance Pentworth dead, a number of questions were answered.

The killer was narrowing the field, and Shayne was certain this second killing would be the last. If he could act fast enough.

"That narrows the list of suspects," Mike Shayne said to Hetty Pentworth when he hung up the phone. "You and I and your brother and Doctor Kavalas were all on the loose when your Uncle Lance was shot. You and I both know that we didn't shoot him."

"That leaves Harry or the Doctor," Hetty said.

"Not entirely," Mike Shayne pointed out. "Someone else might have left the big house for a while without the professor knowing about it. One of the family or even one of the servants. That place is easy enough to slip in and out of. Or the shooting may have been a contract killing; that is, done by a hired killer on order. Maybe it was done by a burglar in the hotel and has no connection at all with Lydia's death. It's too early yet to tell for sure."

"But Harry and Doctor Kavalas are still the logical ones to have done it," she said. "They both have a motive, too, you know."

"I'm not sure I do know," Mike Shayne said. "How does the doctor stand to gain by Lance's death?"

"It's all due to the terms of the original Will under which great-aunt Lydia took control of the estate," Hetty Pentworth explained. "All of the millions of dollars, the property, everything, was left in trusts which Lydia controlled absolutely. You know that the rest of us had no control over the money to this day. Aunt Lydia gave us allowances. She set the amounts and put her own strings on what we could do with the money. If we wanted more, we had to beg for it. Practically get down on our knees and beg her!

"On top of that she had abso-

lute control of what happened to it when she died. We were all shown her Will. There are bequests to the servants, of course, and a family trust in case any one of us dissipated his share, so he wouldn't starve. The rest, the great bulk of the millions, is to be divided equally among the seven of us or our survivors."

"Seven?" Shayne asked. "Don't you mean six?"

"I mean seven. Uncle Howard and Uncle Jim, Janice and Lance, Harry and I and Doctor Kavalas. She wrote him in because he had treated her so long and gained her confidence so strongly. He's supposed to use the money to build a hospital and clinic, but I suppose he could use it anywhere. Now with Uncle Lance dead, he gets a one-sixth share instead of a seventh."

She paused.

"So do the rest of you," Mike Shayne said.

When the police arrived at the Glades Hotel Shayne and Hetty Pentworth were permitted to leave. The officers went to work professionally checking the room for clues.

"Watch yourself, Mike," the Chief said to his friend in the hallway outside the hotel suite. "Whoever is back of this has already killed twice. He'll try to make you number three if he gets even half of a chance."

"I'll watch it," Mike Shayne said. "By the way did you check out those things I asked you about?"

"Sure," Gentry said. "Lance Pentworth did come down to Miami by plane yesterday. The airline says he made the reservation in his own name. Perfectly openly, not as if he was trying to hide anything. Miss Hetty here and her brother check out too. They're registered for the flight they said they took.

"Doc Kavalas checks out clean. He's been practicing psychiatry here and in Palm Beach for a total of eighteen years. Nothing shady in his past. No police record anywhere. He did lose a lot of money in a western land deal five years back, but not enough to break him."

"Enough to make a big inheritance welcome though?" Shayne asked.

"When isn't one welcome," the Chief shrugged.

"Okay then," Mike Shayne said to Hetty. "Let's go see if we can locate that brother of yours."

IX

MIKE SHAYNE headed first of all for the Jockey Club at Hetty Pentworth's suggestion.

"If I know Harry," she said, "he'd figure I'd take you up there to make love. If he got there and found the place empty and the bed unused, he'd figure we stopped someplace for a few drinks. He might go out and look around the bars near here, but sooner or later he'd be sure to come back to the pad to wait."

"Sounds logical," Shayne agreed. "That is, it does if you have a mind like Harry's."

"Well, I haven't been exactly an angel the last few years," the young woman admitted. "For that matter neither has Harry. We've been marking time waiting to come into the really big money, and you know what they say the devil does for idle hands."

At the Jockey Club she went straight to the desk in the main lobby. "Hello Robert," she said to the man at the desk. "Has my brother come in within the last few hours?"

"Why yes, Miss Hetty." The man recognized her at once. "He came in about an hour and a half ago. Actually I expected you both this morning."

"This morning?" Hetty said. "We were both still in New York this morning. Our plane didn't get in till late afternoon."

"Oh, I guess I was mistaken then," Robert said. "I thought I saw Mr. Harry downtown early in the day. It must have been somebody else who looked like him at a distance."

Hetty Pentworth didn't respond but led Mike Shayne down the hall to the right bank of elevators.

When Hetty unlocked the door to the Tower apartment the lights in the comfortably furnished living room were on.

Harry Pentworth stood over at the bar with his back to the door mixing himself a drink. When he heard the door open he spun around to face them.

His face was flushed and he staggered slightly. It was evident to Mike Shayne that this wasn't Harry's first drink of the evening.

"Well sis," the young man said belligerently, "where in the hell have you been? Isn't this place good enough for you two to play your games in? At least it's private."

Mike Shayne was across the room in three long strides. He towered over the flushed and angry young man.

"That's enough," the big man said firmly and clearly. "I'm working for your family tonight, but that doesn't give any one of you the right to talk like that."

Harry stood there looking up at the redhead. Then he set his drink back on the bar and

looked from one to the other of them.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I guess maybe that was out of line. I. . .I've been drinking while I. . .waited for you two. . .and the truth is I'm scared. I think I need help."

Shayne said, "What has you scared?"

"This," Harry said. He took an object wrapped in a guest towel off the top of the bar and offered it to Mike Shayne.

As soon as the big redhead had the towel-wrapped object in his hand he saw the gun. He put it down carefully on top of the coffee table in front of the couch and folded back the corners of the towel. The gun was a Smith & Wesson thirty-eight calibre revolver, blued and with a three inch barrel. Shayne sniffed the gun and decided that it had been fired recently. Cursory examination showed that two cartridges had been discharged.

"Where did you get this?" he asked Harry Pentworth.

"That's part of what scares me," Harry said. "When I came in here this evening I looked around this room. Then I went in the two bedrooms." He had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "I didn't find what I was looking for, but when I turned on the light in my bedroom, I saw this gun lying in

the middle of the bedspread as if somebody had tossed it there. I picked it up with that towel and haven't touched it since."

"Then your prints won't be on it."

"Oh yes they will, Mr. Shayne. That's my gun. I've kept it here ever since we rented this place. In case of a break in. You never know when you'll need a gun. Only. . .only I don't keep it in the middle of a bed. It's supposed to be on the back of the shelf in my closet."

"Easy enough for anyone to find," Shayne said.

"I suppose so. Yes I guess so. . .but, Mr. Shayne, you smelled the gun. Even I know it's been fired recently. Twice. . .and Aunt Lydia was

killed with two shots from a thirty-eight they told me."

"This gun didn't kill your aunt," Shayne said. "The gun that did was found in the room with her body. The police lab has it, and says it's the murder weapon."

"Oh my god," Harry said. "I didn't know. I thought somebody left the gun to frame me. I didn't know what to do." He reached for his drink.

Shayne said, "The gun may still be intended to frame you."

"What! How?"

"Harry," Hetty burst out. "Don't you know? Uncle Lance was killed tonight. By two shots from a thirty-eight."

Harry Pentworth gave the appearance of being genuinely shocked. "Uncle Lance!" he said. "Murdered? I can't believe it. Why didn't somebody tell me?"

"They didn't know where you were," Shayne said.

"You mean about this place? We didn't advertise it at the big house I admit," Harry said, "but Hibbs knew about it. He had to know, so as to get in touch in case of emergency. When they were told about Uncle Lance at the big house, Hibbs should have phoned here."

"Maybe he just forgot," Hetty told her brother. "Maybe two murders in the family in one day are too much for poor old Hibbs and he's rattled. Anyway why worry about that now? The thing we have to think about now is, what do we do next."

Harry was making a visible effort to pull himself together. He picked up his drink off the bar again and emptied his glass, but this time it didn't seem to affect him. His hand was steadier.

"That's right," he said. "What do we do next? I suppose you better say, Shayne. You're the professional here."

Shayne had gotten up from the couch and stood by the window tugging at his ear lobe with thumb and forefinger. It was a sign to anyone who knew him well that the detective was deep in thought.

When Mike Shayne didn't answer at once Harry Pentworth spoke again. "Shayne, what should we do? Who found poor Uncle Lance anyway? One of the family or a servant?"

"Mike and I found him," Hetty said. "He wasn't killed at the house but at a room he'd rented downtown in the Glades Hotel. That's one reason they may suspect you, Harry. You were out of the house when it happened."

"I didn't even know Uncle Lance had a room at the Glades," Harry snapped at her. "Besides you and Shayne were

out of the house at the same time. That's why I left, to look for the pair of you."

"We were together the whole time," Hetty said. "Doc Kavalas was out of the house too. Any one of us could have done it, or so could anybody else for that matter."

"Well I didn't," Harry said. "I can tell you that for sure. I didn't do it and I didn't use this gun. If I had I can promise you it would be at the bottom of the Bay right now and not lying around in a towel waiting for you two to come in and catch me with it."

"That makes sense, Harry," his sister said. "I didn't mean to accuse you, anyway."

Mike Shayne went back over to the coffee table, carefully rewrapped the gun in the towel, and dropped the package in the left hand pocket of his jacket.

"I'm beginning to make some sense out of this whole thing," he said, "but one thing's sure. We won't solve it by standing around this place. The spot where the action is will be back at the big house. That's where we go now."

X

THE THREE rode south on Biscayne Boulevard to the Morningside section in Mike Shayne's car. When they reached the Pentworth estate the house was ablaze with light and the street outside full of cars owned by the newspaper and TV outfits. A small mob of reporters and cameramen were beseiging the uniformed police Will Gentry had stationed at the entrance to the drive.

When the reporters saw Mike Shayne drive through the lines and recognized the well known Miami private eye, they redoubled their efforts to get through.

It didn't do them any good. There were police watching every entrance to the grounds.

Inside the house Shayne spotted Will Gentry and half a dozen of the top men from the Homicide Division at Headquarters.

"Come on in," the Chief called to his friend. "Is that both the young ones you have with you? Fine. Everybody's here then, Doctor Kavalas came in about five minutes ago."

"Everybody's here that's still alive," Harry Pentworth said drily.

Chief Gentry caught Shayne's arm and pulled him aside while Harry and Hetty went on into the big living room where the rest of the family had already assembled with the servants and Doctor Kavalas.

"They're all here now, Mike. How many more of these people are going to die?" Gentry's usually gruff voice was cold.

"All except one, and that one the killer," Shayne said. "That is, they will if we don't nail the killer pretty soon."

Gentry said, "They all seem to have motives. Even the servants. From what I gather that old woman must have made Scrooge look like the last of the Big Spenders. Life in this house must have been real grim for all concerned."

"It was," Mike Shayne said. "But, Will, I believe I know who the killer is by now, and. . ."

"Who?" Gentry demanded.

"I said I thought I knew," Shayne said. "I didn't say I could prove it yet. Not with evidence that would make a grand jury indict a member of a family as rich and prominent as this one. Give me a chance in there and I think I can make the killer give us the evidence himself."

"Anything's a chance in this madhouse," the Chief said. "You know we have one confession already?"

"Old Howard isn't it?" Shayne shook his head wonderingly.

Gentry nodded.

"He's bottom man on my list," Shayne said. "The old boy has a fine sense of the dramatic and he just loves to be the center of attention."

"What you mean is Howard has scrambled eggs between the ears," Gentry laughed. "Still, in this house I won't rule out anything or anybody."

As they spoke there had been increasing peals of thunder coming close from across Biscayne Bay. Now there was a vivid flash of lightning and a clap of thunder that shook the house and made even the police detectives jump.

"Bad storm coming up," Gentry said. "Let's go on in and see what we can stir up. I'll let you fire first, Mike, and trust you hit the right man."

"I'll make it, Will," Shayne said. His words were drowned out by another clap of thunder only a little way from the house. The first big drops of rain were splashing down on roof and shrubbery and driveway.

Inside the big living room the whole cast of characters in this macabre mystery play had assembled. The family were seated facing each other in front of the fireplace and the servants were standing in a corner. Nobody was talking very much and strain showed on every face.

Howard and Professor James Pentworth and the professor's daughter Janice sat together on

the couch on one side of the fireplace. Facing them on the couch's twin were Hetty and Harry. They were at opposite ends of the couch, Hetty nearest the fireplace wall.

Doctor Kavalas was in an easy chair close to Harry Pentworth.

At Chief Gentry's gesture the four servants moved up to stand behind the couch where the two Pentworth brothers sat.

Mike Shayne and the Chief stood facing them all. There were two Homicide plainclothesmen over by the door leading into the hall and another by the french door leading out to the patio terrace and grounds of the estate.

"Early this morning," Mike Shayne began, "I was hired by a member of this family to do a job. That job was to protect you all from a vicious, ruthless and determined killer. That killer has already successfully struck twice. He'll strike again unless he is found and stopped. The next victim may be any one of you." He had their full attention.

"This whole case is complicated," Shayne continued, "by the fact that we have two murders to deal with, not one. That could also mean there may be two killers instead of one. The deaths could have been related or they could have been entirely separate murders. I have to take into account all of these possibilities. That's right, isn't it Chief?"

Gentry nodded.

Shayne looked back at the solemn grouping. "First let's look at the death of Miss Lydia Pentworth. That was definitely a murder and not a suicide. She could not possibly have shot herself twice in the two places where she was shot. Whichever bullet was fired into her first had to be instantly fatal.

"Whoever did the shooting obviously wanted it to look like a suicide," Mike Shayne explained. "After he killed Miss Lydia with his first shot, he wiped the gun free of fingerprints, or else he wore a glove to keep powder burns off his own hands. Then he wrapped the dead woman's hand around the gun and fired it into her body. That explains her prints on the gun and the powder marks on her hand."

Chief Will Gentry interrupted. "That's what our lab men say must have happened. From the angles at which the bullets entered her body they figure the heart shot was the second one fired."

"Right," Shayne said. "That takes care of the question of how she was killed. It leaves us with the more important question of who killed her."

"She killed herself," Howard Pentworth said. "I showed you the pad she wrote her suicide note on. She never took that pad out of the desk drawer except to write on it."

"The police haven't been able to pick up any legible marks from the pad," Shayne said. "It looks as if several sheets had been torn off the top this morning, but they haven't been found and I don't think they will be. I think the killer removed and destroyed them. Except for one blank scrap which he left in Lance Pentworth's hand. I think Lydia wrote notes for a new Will, and gave them to Lance. She trusted him.

"All of you here tonight had a motive to kill. It could have been desire to get the great wealth this woman had withheld from you all for so long, before she actually made a new Will. Or hatred of the way she did it and the tyranical way she managed this family and this house. So let's just do a little surmising. We'll put this puzzle together piece by piece. The Will is the first piece. The motive is the second.

"It could have been a combination of the two motives. In any case everybody here could have had motivation. Any one of you who was in Miami at the time of the murder could have had the opportunity also. This house has been about as easy to get in and out of as Bayfront Park."

"That lets Harry and me out as suspects," Hetty Pentworth said. "Our plane didn't get in till five this afternoon. Our alibi is easily checked."

Shayne ignored her. "We also have to consider the murder of Lance Pentworth this evening and the two attempts to shoot at me, this afternoon and evening. Were all four shootings by the same hand? What motivation do we find for Lance's death?"

"It seems to me you've set yourself quite a task there." The new voice was that of Doctor Morton Kavalas.

"I know I have," Mike Shayne said, "but at least behind all the confusion there are facts. If they exist, they can be found. That's my business, to consider and relate all the possibilities in a case until the truth is obvious."

"It's a little like the work I try to do with my patients," the psychiatrist said. "The same piecing together of apparently unrelated facts until all becomes clear."

"Exactly," the redheaded detective agreed. "And that's just what I've been doing. Tonight, I had a talk with Chief Gentry. What I've learned from him, and what I've observed, all fit

together. All the facts point in one direction."

"For God's sake, get to the point man," Professor Jim Pentworth said. "Who did it?"

Shayne ignored the interruption. "First, let's take a look at the second murder. That of Lance Pentworth. To do that we have to trace Lance's movements and actions.

"We know now that Lance came to Miami yesterday and not this afternoon as most of you believe. Chief Gentry has a statement about the airline he flew down on. The Chief also called Lance's confidential secretary at her home this evening. She confirmed the fact that Lance flew down yesterday, and what's more important, she knew why he came.

"Lance took a room at the Glades Hotel on Lydia's instructions. She wanted to confer with him without the rest of you knowing, as you would have if he'd stayed here at the house. He stayed there last night and came to the house this morning. He had his own key of course. He talked with Lydia."

"Then Lance killed her," Harry Pentworth said.

"I didn't say that," Mike Shayne said, "and he didn't kill her. Lydia wanted to confer with him about having a new Will drawn for her. She wrote

her notes for the Will either before Lance got here or while he was with her.

"We don't know the details of course, but my guess is the Will increased the shares going to Lance and to Doctor Kavalas' foundation, and cut off or decreased the shares for the rest of you.

"Then Lance left here. Later, when Lydia's body was found, Professor Pentworth called Lance's office in New York. The secretary there says she didn't tell him Lance was in Miami. She did call Lance here at the hotel to give him the news.

"Lance was afraid. He knew there was a killer loose and that I was on the case. I think he came back that afternoon, got his old rifle and fired through the window of the room where the Professor and I were talking. I don't think he meant to hit either of us, but he knew someone close to him had killed his mother and he might be next. He wanted to spur me to find the killer. We'll never know for sure now.

"At dinner Lance, like the rest of us, heard Hetty say she knew the killer's identity. His secretary could have told him Hetty knew he had come to Miami yesterday. He was afraid of being accused and left the house right after dinner. The real killer followed Hetty and me up to her room. He opened the door with a pass key and fired twice with a pistol. Those shots were aimed at me, not Hetty.

"Then the killer left the house after we did. He had decided to kill Lance. For one thing he knew, or guessed, about the new Will. He didn't know if Lance had a copy or would talk, but he knew that dead men can't talk. Also, each heir that died increased the killer's own share. Probably the killer found the missing notes for the Will on Lance when he shot him, and destroyed all but one scrap. That was his biggest mistake. Hetty and I found Lance dead. We went from the hotel to the Jockey Club. We found her brother there. Harry gave us this gun."

Shayne took the towel wrapped weapon out of his pocket and placed it on the coffee table between the two couches in front of the fireplace. He unwrapped the gun so all could see. Even the servants moved forward in a group to look.

"I told you," Harry said. "The gun was left to frame me."

Shayne looked at him. "You said if you were the killer, you'd have thrown the gun away. That sounds logical, but it doesn't explain one fact."

"What fact?" Will Gentry asked.

"I examined this weapon carefully in the apartment," Shayne said. "There are two fired cartridges in the cylinder of the revolver. The other four are unfired. A careful examination showed that four cartridge slots in the cylinder have had cartridges fired in them very recently. Two were reloaded and empty cartridges left in two to give the impression only two shots, the ones that killed Lance, had been fired from the gun."

Big Will Gentry said, "Oh, yes I see." He wasn't about to admit that he knew perfectly well that a visual inspection of the gun could not possibly have revealed any such facts.

"The gun was fired four times," Shayne said. "Twice at me in Hetty's room, and twice to kill Lance Pentworth."

"Harry might have done that," Hetty burst out, "but he couldn't have killed Aunt Lydia. He wasn't here. He rode down on the plane with me late this afternoon. The airline already confirmed that."

"I know that," Shayne said. "He couldn't have killed Miss Lydia if the trip down with you was the first time he came to Miami today."

Hetty said, "Oh."

Harry Pentworth jumped for the gun Mike Shayne had left lying on the coffee table. He got the gun in his hand and levelled it at the big redheaded detective.

"I don't know how you knew," he said, "but it's not going to do you any good. I'm going out of here now. Tell your men to stay clear, Chief, or this shamus gets it right in the heart like Lance and Lydia did."

"Hold it, boys," Gentry called.

Mike Shayne grinned at the raging Harry Pentworth. "It's all right, Will. Harry put that gun down. When I examined that gun in your place, I unloaded it."

"The hell you did," the angry Harry yelled. "I was watching. Besides, I can feel the weight of the shells in this gun. Now get out of my way."

"Sorry boy," Shayne said. "I can't do that." He took a step forward.

Harry pulled the trigger. The hammer fell with an audible snap, but the gun didn't fire.

Then Mike Shayne had it twisted out of the young man's hand.

"HOW DID YOU know he was the murderer, Mike?" Chief Gentry asked, after the handcuffed Harry Pentworth was on his way to Headquarters to be booked on two counts of Murder One.

"He gave himself away when we were at the apartment. He said something about the family finding Lance, which would have meant he died at the house, and then mentioned that the family was told about the killing. That was that. The matter of killing Lydia was something else again. I believed Hetty when she said Harry came on the plane with her, and the airline confirmed it. I got suspicious when the clerk at the Jockey Club said he saw Harry downtown that morning.

"You and I both know it only takes two hours from Kennedy or LaGuardia airports to Miami. Harry could have flown down early, killed his great aunt, and flown back to New York in time to return in the late afternoon with Hetty.

"He could have, but if he hadn't lost his head we couldn't have proved it. He suspected the new Will and wanted her dead before she could sign. He came down and returned by another airline and made the reservations in another name. With dark glasses and different clothes there wouldn't be one chance in a thousand we could prove he made the trip. So I left him the gun and bluffed, and he did the rest."

"So he did," Gentry said. "By the way, why didn't that gun fire? For a minute I thought you were gone."

"You should know me better," the big detective said. "Harry was right. I didn't unload the gun at his place. I did the next best thing. I turned the cylinder just enough so the first two times he pulled the trigger the hammer would fall on a cartridge he'd already fired. It worked, didn't it?" Mike Shayne grinned.

In the Next Issue-

DEATH RIDES THE BLACK MARKET

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

Someone was dealing in poison, the low, subtle, disgusting sort of poison that took advantage of people financially, then led them more and more deeply into the criminal world. Mike Shayne found that it took on a very personal aspect as he began to get close to the one who ran the deadly game!

The Godmother

She ruled the Family with an iron will, but Corliss had escaped. Now was the time to show her just how free he was . . .

by BANNISTER WILLIAMS

THE WIDE SLICK CAR slid over the wide slick highway. In the insulated warmth of the rear seat, Tony Corliss looked out at the flat fields whose tediousness was interrupted only occasionally by gaunt stands of leafless trees, black in silhouette against the heavy grey sky.

A landscape for lepers, Corliss thought, turning his gaze from the patches of dirty, late-winter snow.

The view ahead was even less inviting—the back of Joe's head, rising like a rock from sloping shoulders, the back of Joe's neck creased with scars from the carbuncles he had suffered as a youth. Joe, the one-time all-time acne champion of Mill City's youth.

Corliss turned his gaze to the right, where Marta was curled up in her blue-grey mutation mink against the opposite corner of the rear seat. Save for the sad, sullen droop of mouth and chin, it was not unhandsome for a Mediterranean profile. He could remember when he had found its firm dignity compelling—but that had been years ago.

Who gave a damn anymore? They were through. They had been through ever since he hit it big after leaving Mill City. Whether Marta knew that or not, he neither knew nor cared.

Without turning his head, Joe called back, "Hey, Tony, remember the times we went skinny-swimming in Spot Pond? We're coming to it now."

Corliss nodded, "I remember."

He saw Joe's eyes on him in the rear-view mirror above the windshield, awaiting further response. But he didn't feel like talking. He felt like gloating instead.

He was the first and only one of Auntie's family who had made a clean break. Now they were giving him a homecoming. Local boy makes good. Big deal. He was going to stick it right in their collective eye as well as into other portions of their anatomy.

He discovered that he was smiling and wiped the curve off

his lips. Play it deadpan, don't show any aces. Up front, Joe punched a dashboard button and the familiar romantic strains of Tony Corliss's theme song flooded the big car. *A Song for You*. . . Jesus, he was sick of it. But how could you hate anything that had been the springboard to wealth and freedom?

Joe called, "How many gold records you got going for you now, Tony?"

Corliss shrugged and did not answer.

Marta spoke for the first time since they had entered the car. "Tell him, Tony," she said. "You tell everybody else." Then, when her husband stubbornly refused to answer, "Six, Joe—six going on seven with *Pool of Love*."

"That's a lotta records," said Joe and relapsed into silence.

They emerged from a stand of birches and the outskirts of Mill City began to make their familiar, grimy appearance. Shacks, roadside shops, poorfolk houses that appeared to huddle together for warmth against the chill of the knife-sharp March day.

Jesus, Corliss thought, didn't anything ever change around here? In California, you took your eyes off a place and before you could look back some contractor had moved in and put up something else, bright and new and shiny. This homecoming was like returning from a live world to a dead one.

Despite the warmth of the heated car, Corliss shivered within the comfort of his charcoal vicuna topcoat.

Mill City—he had vowed loudly and often that he would never return to its grime and hopelessness. Yet here he was, and of his own volition. He felt Marta's eyes on him, met their dark regard out of the corner of his own.

She said, "Why are we coming back, Tony?"

He shrugged, let it pass. Keep Marta guessing. Keep them all guessing. Especially Auntie.

II

SHE SAT on her throne in the sitting room of the old house on Front Street. Auntie had gotten even fatter than Corliss remembered, a great, gross Buddha of a woman whose throne was a barber chair converted into a *chaise percé*. She could remain seated in it all day without going through the immense engineering complications of going to the john.

Her face, Corliss thought, was as meaninglessly fat as a plump baby's bottom. Yet from its convoluted folds of flesh the

tiny little black eyes glowed as cunning-cold as ever.

Away from their snake-like regard, he found it impossible to believe in Auntie's power —the sole matriarch to dominate a Family, to command it absolutely, in the vast semi-submerged empire of Families that spanned the continent from New York to San Diego.

With those cold dark eyes slicing through him like twin laser beams, Corliss was diminished, sent tumbling backward in time, stripped of the aura of the success that had come to him from the time of his breakaway from Mill City a half dozen years ago.

Nestled in the flat no-man's land of central Ohio, it was not a large city. But its importance in the underworld was out of all proportion to its modest population.

Mill City was, in the parlance, a "sanctuary" town, to which officials who found the state or local heat too great could retreat and continue to wheel and deal unmolested until the temperature sufficiently cooled back home.

This had been true for more than two decades, ever since Giuliana Modesta Terravino, known from the shores of Sicily to Oahu as "Auntie", had assumed her matriarchy. At first, no one had considered her seriously. But other candidates for Fathership had met with various sorts of fatal physical misfortunes or, in one instance, had simply vanished without trace.

Using a well-balanced blend of clout and sheer dominant personality, Auntie had assumed her Godmother's throne.

All but immobilized thanks to the immensity of her bulk, Auntie sat in her chair from dawn until long after dark. Often, she slept in it, not wishing to make the immense effort of hoisting her corpulent body out of its comfortable embrace and into the seldom used bedroom.

Nor did she need to go to the people she wished to see—with rare exceptions, they came to see her.

This was the woman who had dominated Corliss's early life, ruling him with whim of iron. Now, forcing himself to meet the fearful double-beam of her deep-buried eyes, he recalled bitterly that, if it was invariably unpleasant to be out of favor with Auntie, it was worse to have been her favorite nephew.

Almost from infancy, Auntie had coddled him, insisting that he be clad in velvet and fine broadcloth while his contemporaries roamed the streets in denim and cotton. She de-

manded marks and behavior in school that were not required of his fellow schoolmates and their sisters.

It had been a lonely, miserable period, a boyhood from which he had been resolved to break as early as possible. Incredibly, salvation had resulted from the detestable piano lessons and from the equally disliked chore of singing solos in the choir of St. Joseph's Church.

After a frantic eighteen months in the outside world, they added up to independence and burgeoning success as a double-threat recording artist unapproached since the death of Nat "King" Cole.

By then, of course, Corliss was married to Marta, an arrangement to which his spirit had never adapted since it was entirely devised by Auntie.

He had barely known Marta, a mouse-good little girl of every required Family virtue, when the engagement had been promulgated. There had been nothing he could do about it save endure. His one precaution had been to make sure there was no issue from their union, a fact about which he was sure he would soon hear derogatory remarks.

However, as he had told Marta in one of their few moments of candor, "I want no kids who could become Auntie's pets as I was."

Marta had protested mildly but had complied faithfully. She had been brought up to comply to a husband's every wish. She was not a girl to venture beyond the bounds of the parochial doctrine in which she had been reared.

After studying Tony for what seemed to him like a full two minutes, Auntie's face underwent a massive series of shifts and changes that caused her thin lips to part, revealing small even white teeth, and her eyes almost to disappear beneath the folds of flesh that surrounded them.

It was a smile. In Italian, the hoarse contralto of this remarkable woman whispered loudly, "My nephew, you're too thin." Then, to Marta, who stood beside him, "You should feed him better, my niece. Beans and pasta and good red wine. That's what a man needs. But I criticize when I mean to welcome. We are proud of you, my nephew. You have deserved well your success. What a voice to charm the birds from the treetops!"

Then, her speech concluded, the great flabby head turned away and she said, "I eat."

Auntie's ingestive routine reminded Tony, at this moment as in the past, of an old-style

continuous movie. It went on all day and all night, save during the brief hours when insatiable appetite was blanketed by slumber.

Just as he remembered, there were a pair of dark-eyed, prenubile "nieces" fulfilling the offices of ladies in waiting for this uncrowned but enthroned queen of the Mill City underworld.

From a range-refrigerator-sink unit of gleaming white metal installed in a far corner, one girl ladled a generous portion of fetuccini into a large soup bowl. The other conveyed the food to Auntie's mouth, spoon-feeding her and with a napkin removing the occasional rivulet of rich, red sauce that flowed from a corner of the fat woman's mouth.

Corliss glanced around at the baker's dozen of privileged friends and close relatives who stood silent around the walls of the room. They were the welcoming committee, most of them remembered, a few newly met on the way inside the house.

They had glad-handed him with shouts and roars of approval until his ears rang, slapped his back until his shoulder blades stung. Now they stood silent, awaiting Auntie's pleasure.

Nothing, Corliss thought, had

changed. He might have stepped out of this room six minutes rather than six years ago. Nothing had changed, that is, save himself. Taking it all in, he felt reassured and reinforced in his long held decision to break out of the fetters of Mill City and all that Mill City implied.

The act of eating concluded to her satisfaction, Auntie's face recreated a smile with a prodigious effort that caused it to look as if it were approaching dissolution. She clapped her fat-creased hands and cried, "We must have wine and music. This is a fiesta. Tony, you must sing for your family."

He suppressed a shrug —barely. Nor was he surprised when the inevitable roadhouse combo, hired for the occasion, was ushered into the room. Accordion, concertina, guitar —Christ, how cornball! The nondescript musicians greeted him humbly as the room echoed to the titles of various songs the crowd called out for him to sing.

Sorrento, Mona Lisa, an aria from *Pagliacci,* the other tried and trues.

He sang for them as someone thrust a glass of ruby liquid into one of his fists. All the oldies. He knew better than to suggest any of his more modern gold record winners, rightly suspicious that the accompanists would not know them.

As he sang, once again he felt the power radiate from him with the rich golden tones of his flexible baritone. Tony Corliss was remarkable among modern pop singers in that he had sufficient voice to fill a theater with sound minus the use of any microphonic amplification—although he used the mike as a matter of course. His public had been indoctrinated to this sort of gadgetry from childhood and preferred their singers to employ them.

He sang a half-dozen songs and then took a rest, draining his glass of wine and accepting a platter of ravioli from one of the handmaidens. He and Marta were pushed firmly close to Auntie's throne to share the repast with her, for Auntie was hungry again.

The sauce was rich and good and redolent of spices and cheese, but Auntie was not satisfied. She took time off from her ingestion to shake her head sorrowfully at Corliss and say, "Your mother made a better sauce than this. These kids today, they don't know how to cook."

"It tastes great to me," said Corliss. "Better than any I've had in Hollywood. There, the good restaurants are all Milanese, not Neopolitan. They don't know how to make good spaghetti or anything else."

"Restaurants!" Auntie all but spat the word. "There is no good food in restaurants. Good food comes only in the home. Here, my nephew, we fatten you up. How long can you stay?"

She knew perfectly well, of course, but he paid her the dutiful tribute of saying, "Only until late tomorrow afternoon, Auntie. I have an engagement waiting in Cincinnati."

"Break it," said Auntie. "We want you here. It's been so long."

"I know," he said, "but the

half-week guarantee in Chincinnati is twenty thou plus fifty percent of the gross over fifty. If I miss opening night it'll cut receipts damn near in half. The cover and minimum are both higher opening night. It's big money."

He watched the acquisitive light shine in Auntie's eyes from the moment he mentioned the magic numbers that spelt money in the bank. He had known his words would switch them on. Auntie's immense bulk heaved in a tidal wave of sighs and she made a dismissive gesture with her fat-buried right hand.

"No matter then," she said. "It can't be helped. So sing for us again, my nephew. Your voice has improved and it was always beautiful."

This was it, the moment was upon him. He shook his head with well feigned regret and said, "I'm sorry, Auntie, but I've got a date."

III

HE WALKED OUT of the room between parallel walls of stunned silence. His vicuna coat hung with a thick cluster of other coats of less distinction from the multiple hooks of an old-fashioned golden oak clothes-tree.

It took him some seconds to disentangle it, and he moved with an intentional deliberation—yet no one appeared to stop his progress before he sauntered out the front door.

Marta, looking breathless and frightened, caught up with him at the bottom of the well worn white stone front steps. She tugged at his arm, thrust her face close against his, said, "Don't do it, Tony—whatever you're doing, don't do it."

The fact that she spoke Italian indicated the depth of her distress. By his explicit decree, they never spoke the language, except in the throes of making love. The way things had become between them, it was a long time since he had heard her speak it.

Firmly, almost roughly, he cleared himself from her grip. He said, "This is none of your business, Marta. I've got a date."

"Don't go!" she pleaded. Her eyes were pools of entreaty, so deeply buried in her face that the dim light of the streetlamp on the corner barely picked up their reflection.

He looked at her with cool contempt. "This is America—I go where I wish."

"*Please,* Tony!"

She was begging, something he had never seen her do. He pulled further away from her,

said, "You're still one of them, aren't you, *cara?*"

His use of the mild Italian endearment was a deliberate slap in the face. It stopped her. He left her standing there, looking after him hopelessly in the near-darkness, walked to the corner of Front and Oak, turned it.

Anne was waiting there for him alone, as he had told her to be, seated behind the wheel of a car even wider and slicker than the one Joe had driven them in from Cleveland. As he slid in beside her, she said, "Hi, Tony, you're late."

As they took off and turned left again, away from Front Street and all that it stood for, he said, "There was a party, of course."

Rapidly clearing the outskirts of Mill City, proper, Anne said, "You sang, of course, darling."

"What else?" He let it hang. He preferred to hear her talk, he loved the sound of her voice—slightly husky, flavored with governesses and finishing school and quiet assurance and all the things money alone could never buy.

She said, "I hope you've got enough left to sing for *my* party."

He glanced at her profile, briefly golden edged in the headlight burst of a car coming the other way. It was sexy-lean, elegant, the profile of a woman who took having everything for granted. He said, "For you, anything." He meant it.

Anne Williams was the reason he had decided to return to Mill City and fling the gauge in Auntie's face. She was, to a boy from his part of town, the ultimate, the unattainable. The week they had spent together in Chicago, before Marta joined the tour, had been the best week of Corliss's life.

Anne Williams, plus her family, *was* Mill City. If Auntie and the Family controlled much of the town, they did not control the original cluster of families that had moved to the Middle Frontier well over a century ago, that had built the first houses and farmed the soil and put up the mills and got them into profitable operation.

Corliss doubted that they even knew Auntie existed. For them, Auntie's power was irrelevant and immaterial. Their own sources of income were entrenched in banks, in gilt-edged bonds, in real estate held inviolate by unbreakable trusts.

In no way were they dependent upon the favor of such as Auntie—any more than he himself was, now that he had made the break and was independently wealthy beyond his teenage dreams.

Later, as they entered her

home, Corliss marveled anew at the miracle of Anne having turned up in his life when she had.

Looking out at the small sea of faces as he stood on the temporary platform at one end of the huge Williams living room, Tony discovered that the only person he recognized was Pete Galenti—and Galenti, who worked part time for the town's sole catering establishment, was serving as one of the waiters.

As he sang, he felt far from triumphant, for he was aware that his clothes were all wrong, his fifty-dollar shirt overlarded with frills, his trousers too flared, his jacket too snug. Looking at the conservative, beautifully tailored other males in the room, he wished for the first time since he learned the meaning of the word that he were a square.

Square of the manor, he thought wryly. So who really cared about clothes? He did the thing he could do best—sing over them.

He left the stand, dry of throat, uncertain even though the applause was more than polite. He had entertained them—but was he to be accepted? That was the big one.

He stepped out on a flagged and balustraded stone terrace beyond the French windows to smoke a cigarette and gather himself for whatever lay ahead.

The trouble was, Corliss had no idea what to prepare for.

Anne slipped out, joining him in the sweet chill of the night. She came close, enveloping him with her perfume, said, "That was beautiful, darling—you were beautiful."

He kissed her, and then was rudely torn from her arms and spun around to face a very large, very angry young man in a grey and black dinner jacket and a crew haircut. This cube said, "Leave Anne alone, you greaseball. She's *my* girl."

Corliss glanced at Anne quickly to gauge her reaction—but not quickly enough. A hammer of a fist struck the angle of his jaw, just below his left ear, with such power that, for an instant, his whole world lit up like sheet lightning. When it passed, he was leaning against the balustrade and the young gentleman with the crew cut was all but upon him again.

As a boy, under Auntie's guardianship, Corliss had never had to defend himself in any of the usual scuffles indulged in by the other embryonic males of the neighborhood. He was strictly hands-off territory. It was strictly tabu to lift fist or foot against his coddled person.

He had resented his inviolability and, once free of Auntie's

protection, had made a point of learning the art of self defense. Thus far, his mastery of this art had not been put to the test outside of the expensive club gymnasia of Los Angeles. It appeared testing time had come.

His assailant was half a foot taller than his own five nine, easily sixty pounds heavier than Corliss's lean one-fifty-five. From the way he came in, it was obvious he knew how to use his fists, something in which Tony Corliss had never shone. But there were other methods of dealing with trouble.

Managing to slip the bigger man's next blow, a right hook that whistled past his ear, Corliss jabbed a stiff right hand, fingertips first, hard into his assailant's groin. The big cube doubled up, clutching at his most vulnerable section and uttering an odd *whoomphing* sound.

After that, it was pitiful. A left-handed chop to the right side of the neck sent his opponent pitching forward, another deftly delivered to the base of his skull completed the demolition process. He fell forward, thumping his forehead against the stone balustrade, slowly caromed off to lie flat on his back on the flagstones..

Corliss considered stomping on his genitals but decided that, in this environment, it might be considered bad form. His jaw and cheek ached but he refrained from rubbing the spot where his assailant's sneak punch had landed. He looked at Anne, who stood staring down at the unconscious crew-cut character as if turned to alabaster.

He said, "You his girl, darling?"

Her eyes, blue even in that half-light, rose slowly to meet his. From four feet away, he could see the shivering that racked her svelte, elegant, half-naked body. She met his gaze without wavering. "In a way, I suppose. At least I was his girl. Tony, did you *have* to hurt him so badly?"

He felt surprise. "The son of a bitch tried to hurt *me*. In fact, he did." He touched his jaw now, felt a knot under the skin that had not been there before, added, "He damn near broke my jaw."

He took her arm, made a move to lead her back into the house, but she held back, saying, "We can't just leave him there like that."

"Why not?" He was honestly surprised. Where he lived, when you triumphed over a sneak attack you left the vanquished to his own devices. He tugged at Anne's arm, almost

forcing her to come with him. This, he thought, was a very strange world indeed.

Just inside the entry, he stopped as something got through. He said, "What do you mean, you were his girl 'in a way, you suppose'?"

It was her turn to look surprised. She said, "Oh, Andy and I go together off and on—when we're not going with somebody else. I never thought he was *that* serious before, though. Tony, we can't just leave him lying there."

Corliss shrugged. He spotted Pete Galenti headed toward the pantry with an empty tray. He called him over. "Pete, there's a body on the terrace. Get somebody to bring it in."

Galenti's eyes popped and he stared at Corliss as if he couldn't believe his ears. He said hoarsely, "You mean you—you mean he, Andy Radford. . .?"

"Is that his name?" Tony asked Anne. And, when she nodded, "Whoever he is, give him some first aid."

Only then did it hit him. He had actually won his first fight—and against a bigger, stronger man. He began to think. What if Radford had not moved in so openly? What if his first shot had missed? What if. . .?

All at once the backs of his knees turned to water, his stomach to ice. He wanted desperately to sit down, to be sick. But he caught Anne's curiously speculative look, and knew that this was not the time to display the weakness he felt.

This was a time of triumph. He had met the enemy and they were his—Auntie, the man he had vanquished outside, Anne and her world. But he felt singularly untriumphant, incapable of claiming what he had won.

His voice sounded distant, light years away, as he said, "Wait for me, sweetie."

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait—just wait for me."

He returned to the temporary stand, to the microphone, to the music. And he sang—old songs, new songs, hits and non-hits that he knew would surprise and enchant. He captured them again, right in the hollow of his brine-hardened hand, and with this final victory he felt new assurance flood through his reaction-wracked body. He was king of the world and no one was going to usurp his throne.

When he finished, even the musicians cheered him. He smiled, mopping his brow, letting the ovation wash over him, warming the cockles of his ego. He accepted the congratulations of strangers, neither

knowing nor caring any more who or what they were. His eyes sought Anne, finally found her leaning against a side wall, a champagne glass in her hand.

He went to her. She said, "Tony, that was marvelous. It was beautiful." There was something very close to worship in her usually reserved blue eyes.

Somehow, he nudged her out of the crowd, out of the room. He said, "Let's get out of here, sweetie. I've had it."

She hesitated, her lips uncertain. Then she put down her glass on a carved ebony table with elephant's tusks for legs. She said, "All right, Tony. After what you've done, the least I can do is be your chauffeur."

She got their wraps, then led the way out of the house by a series of backstairs passages. Then they were outside, in the big car, snugly insulated once more against the chill of the night. She started it, lit a cigarette, gave him a sidelong glance, said, "Where to, sir?"

He said, "Cincinnati, sweetie. We're on our way."

She said, "Oh. . .?" But she started the car rolling down the driveway.

She turned toward the state highway and swung onto the southgoing lane.

She was actually running away with him, Corliss thought, they were going toward the rich full life he had already earned for himself and in which a girl like Anne Williams would be a creditable consort.

During the early stages of their romance, Anne had told him more than once how cooped up she felt back in Mill City, even at Mill City's topmost level, how dullsville it was with the same people all with the same interests, whirling slowly around and around in the same closed-circuit social backwater. He had wondered then if she meant it.

He believed her now. That stupid jerk, Anne's old boyfriend—what was his name? Andy something? No matter. In demolishing him so effectively, Corliss felt he had firmly nailed in place another plank in his platform of independence of Mill City and all that it stood for. He felt that her past and his were more closely interlocked then had seemed possible.

The night miles sped past and, with each mile of separation, his hurry grew less. After all, he was not due in Cincinnati until the following afternoon. He glanced at the woman beside him, felt sudden desire to celebrate his triumph.

He said, "The first decent

looking motel you can find. . ."

She said, "This is a big step, Tony."

"Bigger than you have any idea, sweetie," he told her. "We're really racing for the moon."

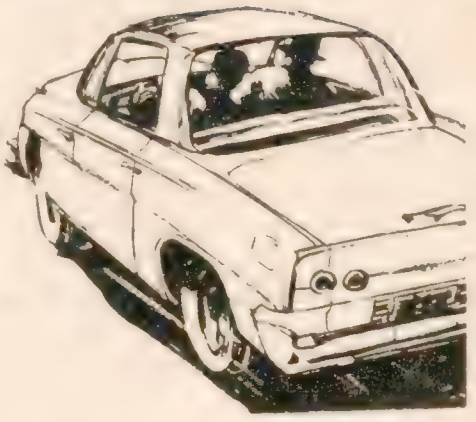
Cornball line from a cornball song. But it fitted the mood of exaltation that held him in its grip. A few miles further on, a National Motels sign glowed in gaudy neon. There was no need for him to speak. Anne slowed and pulled into the driveway. It was not the Plaza or the Beverly Hilton, but just then that didn't matter.

He was recognized by the clerk, of course, and they were given something called the Presidential Suite. Looking around at its plastic luxury, Anne murmured, "I wonder what president this was designed for."

He said, "Maybe the local garbage disposal company president."

She wrinkled her nose, said, "Gad! How insufferably romantic!"

But she laughed softly as she slid into his arms and belonged there. They went right to bed and, as he made love to her, he discovered that he was really giving it back to Marta. And then Marta faded from his mind's eye and he was giving it to Auntie, really punishing all



that hideous, ugly, flabby flesh.

He was giving it to all Mill City—and never had he performed with greater virility.

Home free, home free, home free. . . .

IV

THE DOORCHIME woke him up. It was three twenty-six in the morning. Corliss's first impulse was not to answer it, but there was urgency in its repetition, followed by a pounding on the panels that caused Anne to tumble and toss in her sleep.

Uttering monosyllabic Anglo-Saxonisms, Corliss pulled on his undershorts and padded over the wall-to-wall to answer it.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"The assistant district attorney of Burr County," was the faceless reply.

"What the hell do you want

with me?" Corliss countered. "You've got the wrong guy, mister."

"Antonio Corlese?" said the voice.

Tony Corliss opened the door. The use of his real name, plus the fact that Burr County was Mill City's county, plus the fact that he didn't want Anne awakened—the three factors impelled his compliance. He kept the chain on and peered out at the intruder—and recognized him.

It was Mark de Santis. Corliss had not known he held public office but he did know de Santis as a bright young lawyer, from his own district, for whom a bright future had been predicted even before Corliss had not known he held pubone with him, Corliss couldn't see him—or them. He withdrew the chain and stood back to let him in.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"You'll have to come back with me, Tony. Sorry. . ."

He sounded sorry but, to a young man of Corliss's background, he was a cop, the fuzz, the enemy. He said, "You got the papers to extradite me, Mr. Assistant D.A.?"

Mark de Santis sighed, kept his voice low, said, "You come back with me or I'll have every cop in the state on your tail —and your young lady will be pilloried."

That brought Corliss up short. As a public figure, he was very sensitive to the possibility of a bad press—that was why he paid a substantial cut of his income to a public relations firm in Hollywood. He wished he had some of his boys with him, but he had left his entourage in Cleveland, not to rejoin them until he reached Cincinnati. He felt very naked, very much alone.

He said, "Do you mind telling me why I must go back?"

"Not at all, Tony. You know a man named Radford—Andy Radford?"

"I wouldn't say I knew him."

"Did you have trouble with him tonight at the Williams place?"

Corliss said, "If there was any trouble, he started it."

"But you finished it, Tony. He's on a slab in the Burr County morgue."

Corliss thought—a chop to the groin, two chops to the neck. Hell, it might have injured an arthritic old lady. But not a big rugged S.O.B. like his attacker.

He said, "If this is a joke, de Santis, it's a lousy one."

"It's no joke, Tony."

There was something in the D.A.'s voice that told Corliss the man was serious. For the

first time since the fight, he felt the cold fingers of fear pressing upward against his diaphragm.

He said, "I'll tell Anne."

"It might be better for her if you didn't. You'd better just come with me. Don't worry, Tony—if it was self-defense, you've got nothing to worry about."

Corliss got dressed quietly in the bathroom and left without awakening Anne. As he got into the back seat of the D. A.'s sedan, he had the fugitive wish that this was all a bad dream, that he'd wake up back in the motel bedroom with her.

It was not until he saw Andy Radford's muscular body on the mortuary slab that he felt the deeper, deadlier fear. There were still thin purple welts on the side and back of his neck. There was no bruise visible on his groin. But something else had been added, a slit in the dead man's left side, around which only a little dried blood had accumulated.

He knew then that he was being railroaded and a second, deeper fear chilled his guts. "You can always beat an honest rap, but you can't beat a frame." It was part of the lore of his childhood, all too well substantiated by the facts of life in the part of Mill City into which he had been born.

He rallied himself. If worst came to worst, Anne would bear witness to the fact that he had used no weapon but his hands on her erstwhile boyfriend. But who in hell had stuck the shiv into Andy Radford's heart?

Suddenly, he remembered Pete Galenti. His presence as a hired waiter at the party, could it have been coincidence? Corliss was shaken by the thought, since no one except Anne had known he was coming to Mill City to sing privately for her guests. Who else was there who might have seized the opportunity to convert Andy Radford, unconscious, to Andy Radford, corpse?

He decided not to explore that line of thought until he knew more of what had happened, what was happening, what was going to happen.

As they left the morgue and returned to de Santis's office, Tony calculated the impact of the publicity upon his public image. Tony Corliss a killer? In defense of a girl's honor to her own home? It might be a great deal worse—add sizing to an image Corliss felt was a trifle too Boy Scout, too Pat Boone. The Age of Chivalry not dead and all that.

Whoever was behind this was going to have one hell of a time pinning anything on him that

would keep him down for long. He decided it would be smart to get in touch with his own people. When they reached de Santis's office, he asked if he could use a phone.

"I'd rather you didn't from here," said the official. His tone was polite but there was steel underneath it.

Corliss said, "What the hell is this? You haven't even given me a statement of my constitutional rights."

De Santis said, "Why do you need rights? You haven't been charged with this or anything —yet."

"Then I'm free to go?"

"If you wish. I'll take you. There's a car outside."

Corliss grunted. "Thanks —for nothing. And I didn't put the knife into Radford if you want to know."

Mark de Santis said nothing but there was a light behind his dark eyes that suggested Corliss might have a hard time proving his innocence in court. To hell with him, Tony Corliss thought, to hell with all of them.

Not until the car turned into Front Street did Corliss become aware that they were not heading for the highway that led back to Cincinnati and the motel where he had left Anne asleep. He caught a glimpse of familiar burly shoulders as the streetlamp on the corner flickered past.

He said, "For Christ's sake, Mark!"

"That's right, Tony. We wouldn't want you to get in any more trouble."

"The hell you wouldn't!" This, he thought was the final stinking fillip of a stinking night—he was being taken back to Auntie's. And that meant de Santis and at least some of the local law was in on it. Fear again chilled his innards.

"For Christ's sake!" he cried. "Why me?"

"Don't ask me, Tony," said Mark. "I'm only small fry." He drove into the alley and behind the row of houses, old red-brick workers' houses that looked dingy even in the darkness.

Then, as he brought the car to a silent stop, he said, "Whatever happens, Tony, don't hold nothing against me. We're still friends."

"Sure," said Tony. *Friends!* he thought. *Some friends!*

He got out of the car because there was nothing else to do. He was pushed forward, toward a rear cellar door. Corliss halted on the threshold, saying, "This isn't the way."

"That's where you're wrong," said de Santis. He gave Corliss a final push that sent him stumbling through a metal door

that opened slightly before him.

It didn't stay open long. Somebody slammed it shut behind him and switched on the lights. He had never before been in the room in which he found himself, but he knew what it was. The boys called it the "freezer" and its existence was seldom mentioned even in the intimate circle of the Family.

Its floor and walls were gleaming white tile with a floor that sloped to a grilled drain in its center. Along the far wall, well up, were a pair of stout meathooks of glittering steel. There was a stout wooden butcher's table along one side wall, a collection of various odd looking devices in a long cabinet opposite.

Corliss's intestines felt paralyzed with fear and then savage anger at the outrage being perpetrated upon him by his own people melted the panic inside him. Mark de Santis had not followed him inside. He was alone with Pete Galenti.

Galenti was stripped to the waist, and Corliss was surprised at the muscularity of his arms and torso. He had always thought the part-time waiter ran to fat. He had been wrong.

They wouldn't hang him up on a meat-hook to die in agony while they probed his most sensitive parts with cattle prods. He was too vulnerable for that, he told himself. Nor would they torture him for fear of marking him up. But why the hell were they doing this to him at all? He punched the question at Pete Galenti.

"Don't ask me," said Galenti casually. "I only work here. Sorry about this, Tony."

He moved in and sudden confidence surged in the singer. He had knocked out Andy Radford without much trouble. As Galenti came close, his arms held wide of his hairy, corded torso, Corliss went into action once more. Again he sent a stiff hand into his assailant's groin—and emitted a gasp of agony as his fingertips all but crumbled on a hard metal protector.

Pete Galenti stood back, shaking his head. "Aw, Tony," he said. "We're professionals. You did all right with the college kid—better than we expected. You weren't supposed to win."

Before Corliss could digest this startling news, Galenti's left hand struck at him so rapidly that, even though he was watching closely, his eyes could barely follow it. He had taken his share of hard hand-heel blows in the Hollywood gymnasium, but no one, not even the instructors, had ever

hit him so hard a backhand.

It caught him low, just above the left collar bone, seeming to crush the base of his neck, and its force slammed him down hard on the tile floor, taking the wind from his lungs.

Before he landed, Galenti's left fist buried itself in his gut, causing an awful sickness to grip his body. He could only lie there, heaving drily into the gutter, otherwise utterly unable to move, the bile bitter in his gagging throat.

Galenti stood over him, said, "That's just a taste, Tony. We can keep you here a month if we want to and not leave a mark on your body that would show. You wouldn't want that, would you, Tony? I know I'd hate to do it to you."

Slowly, the singer regained some of his self-control. All the fight was out of him and Galenti knew it, even though he was unable to croak his surrender.

Pete Galenti cleaned him up as gently as a health club masseur, got him on his feet, even led him to the inner door that opened on the up stairway beyond.

Corliss stopped there, said, "Pete, who slipped Radford the knife? Was it you?"

"Come on, Tony," said his recent tormentor gently. "You know better than to ask a question like that. What do you want me to say, that I did it? What would that prove?" He paused, then added, "You handled yourself pretty good in that one, Tony. None of us had any idea. After all, around here you were always Auntie's boy."

He dragged himself up the stairs, hurting, still sick, bewildered. Marta was waiting for him in the hall, her dark eyes inscrutable. She had to help him into the front sitting room but left him there alone with Auntie.

It was the first time Corliss had ever seen Auntie unattended. Always, she had had someone with her. Important men, political bosses, ward heelers, labor leaders, endless visiting relatives of all ages —and always the two handmaidens.

Seeing the great blob of flesh sitting there on its throne alone, Corliss was seized with a sudden impulse to end that absolute dominion. All he would have to do would be to get his hands on that submerged throat, to squeeze the arteries nervously, to shut off the flow of blood to the brain while preventing her from crying out.

As always, she read his thoughts and the twin laser eyes impaled him—and, as always, he stood helpless before the naked power of that im-

mense will and personality.

The voice, when it came, was almost gentle. "I am glad you decided to come back to us, Tony. You're the most gifted of all my children. The signs were right at your birth, and I have always given you every opportunity. I'm afraid you have been a naughty boy, but I forgive you."

Then the voice hardened almost imperceptibly, and she added, "As long as you never do it again."

His own voice sounded half-strangled to his inner ear as he said, "But what have I done, Auntie, for God's sake? Since when is it a crime to try to live your own life?"

"Who said anything about a crime?" Auntie countered. "You have done well, Antonio, even better than your mother and I dreamed. You are a very rich young man and all by the music I had you taught. Unfortunately, like so many young people today, you have forgotten your obligations."

The hoarse Italian accent was more than he could bear and the words it uttered caused his temper to flare. He said, "When I get out of here, Auntie, I shall never come back. I hate this town, I hate the Family, I hate you."

"Such fire!" she said admiringly. "It's of no consequence. Poor Tony—your only mistake was to become too successful, to make too much money."

"Since when is that a crime in this country?"

"I didn't say it was a crime," she said and her voice regained its cutting edge. "I said it was a mistake. Tony, you have become a valuable asset to the Family. We want you to look after your own. We went to great trouble to get you back here."

"I didn't come back here to see you," he said, his voice low with fury. "I came to see somebody else, somebody you neither know nor can ever understand."

"So. . .?" Somehow the eyebrows rose, adding wrinkles to an already wrinkled forehead. "The Williams girl is a tramp. Why do you think she went to bed with you, Antonio? She did it under orders."

"You're lying. She'd never. . ." He recalled the unprovoked assault by the unfortunate Andy Radford, Galenti's hitherto incomprehensible remark about the embroglio on the terrace, "You weren't supposed to win."

All at once, he got the whole picture. The aloof Williamses were caught in the same trap, gilt-edged investments and all. He wondered how it had come about, but the answers were

not hard to come by. Labor and politics—Auntie was a pastmistress at playing them off against one another and ultimately using them to obtain control of capital.

So Anne was part of it, as was the dead man. Corliss wondered what Galenti's original assignment had been. Probably to make certain the bigger man did not injure him too badly and damage his money-making potential. He had called Auntie with the unexpected results of the encounter, and Auntie had arranged the murder and the sweet little deal with de Santis.

He would never know for certain, of course, but that was how he read what had happened. The murder would be labeled *Unsolved* but the file would remain open in the Assistant D.A.'s files. All he would have to do was get out of line and they would open it up with all sorts of incontrovertible testimony. Auntie had him over a barrel.

He sighed, said, "Okay, Auntie, you win. What are your terms?"

She lifted her eyebrows again, said, "Terms? I used no such word, Antonio." Then, dropping all pretense of elephantine coyness, she told him. There would be no contract, there was no need for a contract. It was already arranged. He would pay off his current management, sign a contract with a certain other firm, one of the big ones in the entertainment industry. He would make more money than he was making now, the opportunities would be greater. He wouldn't get all of the money, of course.

"But it will be a nice living. You'll have your big house, your big cars, all the girls you can handle. But you owe something to your family—and remember, Antonio, Marta is my niece. Just remember, that's all."

"She's in this, too?" He couldn't believe it.

He tried to think of Marta, mouselike, meek, virtuous little Marta, conspiring in the flaming affair with Anne Williams that had all but destroyed their marriage. But then, on second thought, she had only done it as a device to bring him back to Mill City, where Auntie could get him under control.

"Marta is smart—smart enough to keep her mouth shut," said Auntie. "How you get on, what either of you do, I don't care. But there will be no divorce."

"My God!" he cried. "This isn't Palermo."

"You think not?" Auntie countered.

IT'S NOT A COFFIN

by BILL PRONZINI

He had asked once too often for a one-way ride to hell. Now, at last, it had come.

KENWORTH was sawing feverishly on a two-by-four laid across a pair of sawhorses when Sam Pryor came down the basement steps. It was just past three o'clock of a hot Saturday afternoon in mid-July, and Kenworth had been working steadily for over six hours.

"I heard all the hammering and banging down here," Pryor said. He was a balding man with a comfortable middle-age paunch that overlapped the waistband of lemon-colored Bermuda shorts. His thin white

legs, protruding from the loose bottoms, reminded Kenworth of a pair of pipe cleaners. "What are you building, Charley?"

Kenworth did not reply. An intense young man with fierce gray eyes, he gave full concentration to finishing the cut in the two-by-four.

When he had, he carried the measured section to his workbench, where an oblong, partially-completed box, some five feet in length by two feet in width, sat on the sheet-metal-covered surface.

Pryor stepped over to inspect the construction, sipping on a drink in a tall frosted glass with a sprig of mint peeking over the rim.

"What the hell?" he said. "That looks like a coffin."

Kenworth picked up a small hatchet and began driving nails into the section of two-by-four with the blunt end.

"Now why would you be making a coffin, Charley?" Pryor asked curiously.

"It's not a coffin, Pryor."

"That's what it looks like to me."

"Well, it's not."

"What is it, then?"

"It's a planter box."

"If it is, it's the damnedest looking planter box I've ever seen," Pryor said. "It looks just like a coffin."

Kenworth lifted the wood section to the side of the box and fitted it into place there. He hit the head of the first nail with the hatchet, scowling fiercely.

"Listen, Charley," Pryor said with a grin, "it seems to me that you've put a lot of work into that thing. Yes sir, I can tell by looking at it that you've expended considerable effort there. You're clever with wood, and that's a fine talent. But let's face it, Charley; you don't want to *put all your pegs into one casket.*"

Oh Lord, Kenworth thought, not this morning of all mornings, not when he was trying to finish this planter box for the African violets the man from the nursery had brought. That was all he needed. First the handle on the claw hammer, his only hammer, had broken; then the Tiebold kids had started throwing a tennis ball up against his rose trellis; then the blade on his good hand saw had snapped in two; then the summer heat had come through the cement walls of the basement like a knife through soft butter; then—

"Look at all this sawdust, will you?" Pryor said, glancing around the workshop area. "You want to be careful, Charley; you can have a bad *coffin spell* with all this sawdust."

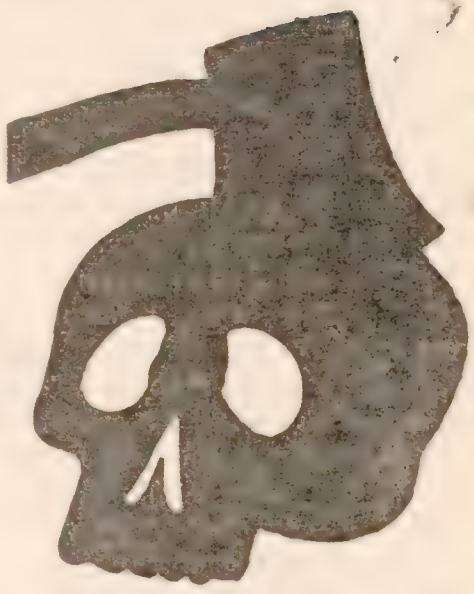
Yes, here they came, Ken-

worth thought. One right after the other, an unceasing, maddening flow. He had always disliked puns—they were childish and decidedly unfunny—but since Pryor and his wife had moved next door eighteen months before, he had grown to actively hate the things.

Pryor was a salesman who considered himself a wit and his sense of humor revolved around puns. In fact, he was fond of boasting that no one had ever been able to out-pun Sam Pryor in a head-to-head contest, and that no one ever would. It wouldn't have been so bad if Pryor had minded his own business; but no, he was constantly dropping over to visit Kenworth, constantly invading Kenworth's privacy, totally oblivious to the fact that Kenworth was both reclusive by nature—a bachelor, he had few friends and devoted most of his spare time to his garden—and a commercial artist who required peace and solitude in order to function.

And, of course, Pryor seldom if ever overlooked the opportunity to pun, knowing full well that Kenworth hated the word-playing and taking what amounted to malicious pleasure in his neighbor's annoyance.

Kenworth struck one of the nails a glancing blow, bending it sideways. Sweat popped out



in little glistening beads on his forehead.

Cursing softly, he slid the blade of the hatchet under the nail and tried to lift it upright. If the claw hammer had not broken, then he could simply have pulled the nail out; but no, all he had was the hatchet, and a hatchet was no damned good for straightening bent nails or pulling them out.

Pryor leaned nearer to watch him. "You know," he said, and shook his head wonderingly, "if there's one thing I really go for, it's *home-made bier.*"

"It's a planter box!" Kenworth shouted suddenly. He managed to get the nail straightened somewhat, but when he attempted to drive it

in, it bent sideways again. "How many times do I have to tell you that, Pryor? It's a damned planter box!"

"Sure," Pryor said. "You know what your trouble is, Charley? You don't have a sense of humor. You take everything too seriously; it's a wonder you don't have an ulcer. Half the time you're as ill-tempered as an *Alaskan Brown Bier.*"

Kenworth pounded the bent nail viciously into the wood and put another one slightly off to one side of it. "Why do you have to keep making those lousy, disgusting puns? I don't think they're funny. Nobody thinks they're funny, you know that?"

"See what I mean?" Pryor said. "No sense of humor." He took a long swallow from the frosted glass in his hand. "Say, how about a drink, Charley?"

"No," Kenworth answered.

"Gin and tonic," Pryor said.

"I don't want a drink."

"Well, it sure beats a *bier* in this hot weather."

Savagely, Kenworth drove another nail. He was sweating profusely now.

"Did I ever tell you about that carnival I saw downstate last fall?" Pryor asked him. "They had this woman, the feature sideshow attraction, who was supposed to be a zombie. When you paid your four bits and went into the tent, the first thing you saw was her lying in a big pine box. You could walk up there and look her over if you wanted to, and damned if she didn't look like a zombie, too, with these big staring eyes.

"Well, to start the show, they turned off all the lights except a single red spot, see, and as soon as that happened she got right up out of the box, nice as you please, and started to walk around. They had her billed as the *Bier-Dead Lady,* of course."

Kenworth bent another nail. "Now that's enough, Pryor," he snapped, straightening up. "That's just about enough. I don't want to hear any more of your puns. This is my basement, and I don't have to stand here and listen to any more. I detest them. They make me sick to my stomach."

"Well, excuse me," Pryor said, feigning pique. "I didn't know you were going to be this *bier-stly* about it."

"That's enough, Pryor."

"Just *bier* with me for a while."

"That's enough, I said!" The sweat had gotten into Kenworth's eyes now, and his temples pounded malignantly.

"But I have *bier-ly* begun," Pryor said.

"Stop it, damn you! Stop it!"

"Why, what's the matter,

Charley?" Pryor asked innocently, grinning. "Am I becoming *un-bier-able?*"

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!"

Kenworth was furiously digging in his garden when Mrs. Pryor came through the gap in the hedge separating their property. She was a fat woman with liquidy bovine eyes, dressed in a too-small sunsuit.

"Charley," she said, "have you seen that husband of mine? He wandered off an hour or so ago, and I can't find him anywhere."

"No," Kenworth answered, pausing. "I haven't seen him."

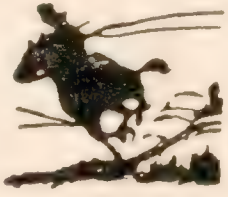
"Well, he'll turn up eventually, I guess." She stood watching Kenworth for a moment, and then indicated the wooden construction—covered with a square of light canvas—nearby. "I see you're putting in a planter box, Charley," she said.

"Actually," he said, "I'm burying a coffin."

Mrs. Pryor laughed appreciatively. "That's a good one," she said. "And Sam says you don't have a sense of humor." Still chuckling, she shuffled back through the hedge again.

Sam Pryor was wrong, all right, Kenworth thought. I have a very fine sense of humor, as a matter of fact. Why, the trouble with Sam was, he had one too many *biers* today; yes, and because of that, I realized I couldn't stand any more *Pryoring* into my life. So, because he's been *axing* for it for such a long time, I revealed to him exactly what a gay *blade* old Charley Kenworth really is.

Smiling slyly, Kenworth began once more to dig.



ATTENTION—WESTERN FANS

Have You Met MIKE SHAYNE'S Frontier Companion?

ZANE GREY WESTERN MAGAZINE

A NIGHT TO KILL

She had traded her body for a dead man's gold. Now she must learn the terrible price she must pay...

by HAL ELLSON

AT TWO MINUTES of one in the heat of the afternoon, the alarm clock spent itself and stopped.

Detective Victor Fiala noted this. It signified nothing. It was now twenty minutes past midnight, which also signified nothing. He set the clock, wound it, reached for the bedlamp to put it out and the phone rang. He'd let it ring, he thought, and it did. He was forced to pick it up. Captain Meza was on the wire and properly apologetic for calling.

"Save the apologies," Fiala snapped. "What's up?"

"Better come to headquarters and find out."

"Sorry. I'm not due in till morning."

"That's what you think. The chief asked for you, so—"

"Tell Lopez I'm tired."

"You tell him, Victor, if you have the courage."

"All right, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"I remember when you used to make it in ten," Meza chided.

"Age is catching up with me," Fiala answered and hung up. Dressing, he went into the kitchen and his daughter Aurora appeared.

She looked startled.

"I thought you went to bed," she said.

"So did I," he answered gruffly. "Put the coffee on."

"You're going out?"

"The coffee and not so many questions, please."

Aurora obliged but couldn't resist another question. "You're going to work?"

"Well, I'm not going to a night club."

"Very funny. Should I wait up?"

"That would be foolish. I'll take the coffee now."

"But it's hardly heated."

"Don't argue."

"Ei, the older you get—"

"I don't need you to remind me of my age," he interrupted her sharply.

Aurora watched her father empty the cup, then shook her

head. "I don't like it when you go out like this."

"Nor do I," he said, and kissed her forehead. "Now off to bed."

"Come back safely, Papi."

"I intend to," he said and hurried from the house.

Ten minutes later he arrived at headquarters. Captain Meza awaited him outside under the arcade.

"A dead man in the Imperial," he explained. "Let's go."

The Hotel Imperial stood just across the plaza. The two men took the elevator to the third floor and entered the room where the dead man had been found by a bellboy sent to call him when he didn't respond to his phone.

"He was supposed to catch a plane," Meza said. "Name's Robert Carter. An English business man; he was going home."

"And someone put a knife in him."

The knife was still in Carter's back. A wallet lay on the floor, a woman's fancy red-leather belt and a cigarette stained with lipstick.

"Nine pounds in English money in his wallet," Meza said. "Not much for a business man to be carrying."

"Not much," Fiala conceded. "A woman was here?"

"The elevator operator brought a girl up. He believes she came to this room."

"Let's find the girl," Fiala said and led the way out.

Carriages used by visitors to the city were standing about the plaza, waiting for late revelers. The drivers were questioned. Nothing came up from them. The taxis were next. The fourth driver said he'd picked up the Englishman outside a night club; the fellow had some time to kill and wanted a girl.

"And you got him the girl?" Fiala asked.

The driver shook his head. He hadn't, but he'd referred him to another cabdriver, Fat Vargas. His cab was in front of a cantina across the plaza.

FIALA AND Meza found Vargas inside at the bar. Questioned, he acknowledged introducing the Englishman to a girl named Eugenia Vega. He'd picked her up in a restaurant, then driven her and the Englishman to a tourist shop, then on to the Imperial. At the hotel, the Englishman got out first and went up to his room. The girl followed.

"So far, so good," Meza remarked.

"So far, too easy," Fiala came back with. "Eugenia Vega doesn't ring a bell."

"You know all the working girls by name?"

"Most of them. Let's see if she's in the book."

Back at headquarters there was no prostitute listed under the name Eugenia Vega.

"So back to Senor Varga," Meza said. "He may know where she lives."

It was late now and only two taxis remained in the plaza; neither belonged to Vargas. According to one of the remaining cabbies, the fat one had gone home to bed.

"We'll blast him out of the straw," Fiala said.

A ten-minute drive from the plaza brought them to Vargas' home and the fat one was routed from bed. Yawning, he gave Eugenia Vegas' address and closed the door.

The Vega girl's home was a small crumbling adobe in a poor section of the city. Her father, a little man with a big mustache, opened the door. His daughter wasn't at home. She hadn't been home in a month.

"She ran away?" Fiala ventured.

"With some fellow. She was supposed to marry him, but he already had a wife."

"Too bad. Where is she now?"

"Living with the whoremaster," the old man said flatly.

"And the fellow's name?"

"Miguel Asturias."

Captain Meza looked at Fiala. "The name doesn't ring a bell."

"The photographer," the older man said.

"I'm still in the dark, Victor."

"It's all right, Captain." Fiala thanked Senor Vega and turned away before he could inquire about his daughter.

"What about this Asturias fellow?" Meza asked once they were in the car.

"A bad guy with a bad record. Drives a cab. Let's see if he's home."

Asturias wasn't home. His wife hadn't seen him and didn't know where he was. His taxi stood in front of the house.

"He owns a car," Fiala said. "I don't see it. Maybe he took off with it."

"With the girl?"

"Most likely."

"They're probably halfway across the country by now," Meza said. "What do you suggest?"

"The usual. Send out on a bulletin on them."

They drove back to headquarters and parted there. Coffee at the Blue Moon for Fiala. The night was hot and he was in no hurry, scanning the faces of those who came through the door. Finally he spotted the one he was waiting for, a thickset, dark man, known as the

Bull. He signaled and the fellow came to the table.

"Where's Pedro Mendoza?" Fiala asked.

"Don't know," the answer came.

"See what you can find out."

"Yes, senor." He left and returned in ten minutes. According to his source of information, Pedro Mendoza had left the city.

"With his old pal Asturias?" Fiala asked.

"Yes, senor."

"Ei, he's dumber than I thought." Fiala thanked his informant and went to headquarters. "Better send out another bulletin on Asturias and the girl," he said to Meza.

"They've a friend with them, Pedro Mendoza. A real bad actor."

"How did he get into the show?" Meza asked.

"I don't know, but he's an old prison pal of Asturias and a dangerous fellow with a gun. He's also stupid enough to let himself be used by Asturias. That's how he landed in prison the last trip. Asturias talked him into a job that backfired. Mendoza was caught and took the whole thing on his shoulders."

"It could have happened that way again," Meza remarked.

But such wasn't the case. The next day Fiala was having coffee in the Blue Moon when the Bull tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear. Finishing his coffee, Fiala stepped outside and got into his car. A five minute drive brought him to a bridge spanning a dry river-bed.

Pedro Mendoza was waiting there. Fiala opened the door of his car and Mendoza climbed in.

"All right, let's have it, Mendoza."

"Ei, I hope I'm not making a mistake."

"You already have, or you wouldn't have asked to see me. Now get on with your story."

"I will, senor, but, first, you've got to believe me. I had nothing to do with the murder of the Englishman."

"I was sure you'd say that."

"It's the truth. That's why I asked to see you."

"Why me?" said Fiala.

"You know why. If I went to Meza—"

"He wouldn't shoot you."

"He's a tough fellow."

"To make a deal with?"

"You can't talk to him," said Mendoza.

"But you can with me?"

"Yes, senor."

"If you're implicated, there won't be any deal."

Mendoza hesitated, worried.

"I heard the radio report,"

he said finally. "It was the first I knew of the Englishman's murder and that I was implicated."

"So you came looking for me."

"As soon as I heard the report."

"That was smart, but how did you manage it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were with Asturias and the girl."

"Not when I heard the report. I'd left them and returning to the city."

"You say you didn't know about the murder," Fiala said, "but how come you were with them?"

"Asturias asked me to do him a favor and drive him and his girlfriend to a place in the country."

"How come he didn't use his own car?"

"He said it was being fixed."

"A lie. He figured his own car would be spotted if he used it."

"I know that now," Mendoza said.

"But you know nothing of the murder?"

"No, senor. Asturias tricked me with the girl. He said he was taking a little vacation with her." Mendoza shrugged. "She's young and pretty."

"Where did you leave them?"

"On Black Horse Mountain. There's a cabin up there next to the little falls."

"They took provisions with them?"

"Some cans of beer and a bottle of tequila."

"They can't live on that."

"There are people above the falls. Asturias knows them; he lived there before he came to Montes."

"Then you think he'll stay there?"

"Where else can he go, and what better place can he find to hide?"

Fiala nodded. "Yes, what better place? All right, you can go, but don't leave the city. You're still not in the clear."

"You know where to find me?"

"Yes. Another thing, don't show your face to Meza or you'll be in the lock-up before you know it."

Mendoza nodded, thanked the old fellow and stepped from the car.

Ten minutes later Fiala sat down on the bench in Meza's office and grinned at the captain.

"All right, out with it," Meza said.

"Asturias and the girl are on Black Horse Mountain. That's straight from the horse's mouth."

"And the name of the horse?"

Fiala smiled, and the captain knew better than to pursue the point. Shrugging, he said, "I presume you're going after Asturias and the girl?"

"Naturally."

"How many men do you want?"

"None. This is a one-man job."

"Ridiculous. You'll never find them by yourself in that wilderness."

"Perhaps not, but a group of policemen thrashing about—" Fiala shook his head. "The mountain people will spot them, warn Asturias and he'll take to a cave. Do you know how many caves there are on the mountain? He could hide for years."

"If he doesn't starve to death."

"He comes from there. Those people will hide him."

"And you?"

Fiala shrugged. "If I pull in my belt and move fast—"

"Going up there alone, you may never come back."

"I've thought of that, but every time I cross the big plaza, I'm not sure I'll make it with all those crazy drivers."

Laughing, Meza lit a cigarette and shook his head. "You complain about the balcony stairs when you have to see the chief, yet you're going to climb Black Horse Mountain."

"Who said I'm going to climb it?"

"You're taking your car?"

"And be shot behind the wheel?"

"But you can't go on foot. A man of your age."

"Ah, here we go again with the age business."

"My apologies, but let's face the facts."

Nodding, Fiala arose. "For your information, Captain, every morning when I look in the mirror I face the facts. I don't find them pleasant, but there they are so I do what I have to do and hope for the best." With that, he bowed and turned to the door.

"Take care," Meza said after him. "And by the way, you didn't say how you're going to climb the mountain."

"I might try a burro if he's willing to carry me," Fiala said at the door.

"Well, at least, you can joke, Victor."

FIVE MINUTES later Fiala was at the Black Cat cantina, fondly known to its patrons as the Oasis, a reputable place, usually crowded and noisy. But at this moment empty, with only the stout Pancho, behind the bar. Fiala ordered a double mescal, and Pancho, raising his brows, filled a tall glass.

"Trouble?" he said, capping the bottle.

"Not yet—at least," Fiala said, lifting the glass and finishing it off. With that, he started for the door.

"Leaving so soon?" Pancho said after him.

"Sorry. I've an appointment with a burro. Adios."

The door closed. Fiala went to his car, climbed in and drove home through the hot empty streets. Once in the house, he went straight to the patio and took his chair under the avacado tree.

Moments later Aurora appeared before him. "You're home, Papi?"

"As you can see."

"They've pensioned you off?"

"My dream, little one. Now how about a cold bottle or two?"

"Something tells me you've already had some."

"You could be right. Now if you don't mind—"

Aurora went back in the house, returned with two small Carta Blancas and said, "You're not working today?"

"Very much so. I'm on an assignment. The beer's to help me relax and think. After that, a good nap and I'm off to the races, as they say."

"When you talk like that, I know it's serious business."

"Everything is, and nothing is."

"Papi, don't talk like that. Ei, why don't you give it up?"

"And who'll take care of my grand-children?"

"There are other jobs."

"But not for me." Fiala lifted a bottle, tasted the beer and smiled. "Ah, good and cold. Now let me be, I need some sleep. Wake me at four."

Frowning, Aurora nodded and left him to himself and his thoughts. Bad thoughts they were, of an awesome mountain wilderness where his quarry could hide out in a hundred caves, or gun him down in ambush and bury his body where no one would ever find it. Chilling thoughts to an old man who wanted to live. Ei, what if I never see Aurora and the little ones again? What if— Fiala lifted the bottle once more, emptied it and diverted his thoughts to the job ahead, the assault on the mountain and the search for the killer. The mescal and beer steadied him. A

burro to climb the mountain, but how to approach Asturias without being gunned down? Empty, the second beer bottle slipped from his hand and he nodded off to dream of the black shadow of a wild animal stalking him high up on the mountain.

Then he saw it, a pool at the side of the upper falls, and a black jaguar lapping water. The black beast moved its head, green fire flashed from its eyes; suddenly it sprang and with a roar was upon him. Crying out, he awoke, sweating and shaken, but safe in the patio.

"A bad dream?" Aurora was standing at the kitchen door.

"It was nothing."

"It's four o'clock."

He glanced at his watch, stood up and asked for the little ones.

"They're playing next door."

"Let them play, but kiss them for me. I'll be back in a day or so."

"You must be going far," she said, worried.

"Far enough," he answered, and kissed Aurora on the forehead.

At ten past four he sat down at the counter of the Blue Moon. A hot meal was in order, but his stomach was in knots. Black coffee would have to do. He drank two cups, smoked a cigarette, bought a bag of sweet cakes and went to his car. The trip was not appealing.

Two hours of fast driving would bring him to Black Horse Mountain and then . . .

Fiala shrugged and moved off, circled the big plaza fronting headquarters, and made for the bridge spanning the dry river bed. From there a good road took him out of the city and into a lush countryside which finally gave way to a sparse terrain of stunted mesquite and cacti. Yellow bloom on the mesquite, fire-red flowers on the cacti and a white haze across the rolling desert.

The car roared on, the road empty, blue mountains far in the distance. Too far, he thought, pressing on the gas, and the road dipped, swept under him, a white thread of concrete in a vast desert wilderness.

At ten minutes of six the valley narrowed and the mountains towered up, miraculously swathed in green. At six, the car approached the foothills of Black Horse Mountain.

Slowing, Fiala cut off the road, stopped his car behind a huge Yucca, got out, opened the trunk-in back and took out an old straw sombrero. A white cotton blouse, trousers, worn sandals and serape followed.

A long time since he had use

for these, Fiala thought, unbuttoning his shirt.

At ten past six, dressed in peon's outfit, he entered the tiny village of Santa Maria, walked into its one and only cantina and asked for a beer. A second beer followed the first and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"How far is it up to the falls?" he asked the barman.

"A long climb, senor."

"Too far to walk?"

"A burro would help."

"Where can I hire one?"

"A hundred pesos and my brother will supply you."

"I can only afford fifty."

The barman weighed the offer and said, "Fifty for my brother and ten for my services."

Sixty pesos and the bargain was sealed. The barman opened two bottles, one for himself and one for Fiala.

"You know the way up to the falls?" he asked.

"Yes, I have an old friend up there. He owes me money."

"Debts are hard to collect. It'll be dark before you reach the falls. Watch your step and let the burro have his head. Salute!"

"Salute!"

Both men lifted their bottles and drank.

The mountain was slumbering. Not a leaf moved on the dark green slopes. The silence was awesome as the burro plodded up through the foothills.

"It'll be dark before you reach the falls," the barman had said, and already the night was closing in. Swift shadows were striking down the slopes. Minutes later they swirled about Fiala with a suddenness that chilled him.

Fiala tried heeling the burro to hurry him on. But the brute had a mind of its own. Moving no faster, it plodded on and darkness took the mountain. Feeling like a blindman, Fiala gave thanks to the brute he was riding. The burro knew the way.

They went into the blackness while the air grew chiller. Finally Fiala wrapped himself in the serape, closed his eyes and thought of Montes. At this hour after the day's heat, the city came to life, with throngs of young people in the big plaza, the army band ready to concert, restaurants and cantinas filling up. And here he was, Fiala thought, a blindman astride a burro. He should have his brain examined for getting into this.

Now the sound of rushing water caught his attention. Water from the falls high above riding a deep stream-bed somewhere to the right. Clean, cool water from the mountains. The

burro kept plodding and now the ascent was steepening, the water splashing in the dark.

A half-hour later the burro waded through a stream and came out on a plateau. When it reached the trail again, Fiala looked up and there, a vast and ominous shadow rising into the sky, stood Black Horse Mountain.

Asturias and the girl were up there, but where? At the cabin near the little falls Mendoza had mentioned? Perhaps they'd stopped there for a while to make love.

The girl was foolish. Why did she have to pick a married man and one like Asturias? Fiala thought. He looked at his watch. An hour had passed. Another half would bring him to the falls. To reach the little falls might take fifteen minutes, but would it be wise to attempt to approach the cabin in the dark? Even in daylight a misplaced step could mean disaster.

The burro plodded on through the dark. In a half-hour's time Fiala heard the sound of rushing water, the air grew chiller, the ground leveled off and the burro entered a small clearing.

Halting the animal, Fiala listened, then dismounted. To his right, trees sided a gorge. Approaching them carefully, he found himself on a rock ledge. Below him water splashed and seethed in a black basin. Now he raised his eyes and faintly in the dark saw the pale-white mane of the falls spilling down from an invisible ledge.

A quarter of an hour later he reached the site of the little falls. Again there was a small clearing and here he tied the burro, then looked down into the gorge which he'd have to cross to reach the cabin. It was black below, the water seething. Only an insane man would attempt to cross the gorge at night.

Fiala went back to the burro, his body aching from the long ride and chilled with the night air. He was hungry too, but he'd forgotten the sweet cakes he'd bought. They were back in the car. Now there was nothing to do but wait for the light of morning.

A long, long wait, he thought, but, at least, he had the serape. Throwing it over his shoulders, he sat down with his back against a small tree and, shielding his lighter with his cupped hands, lit a cigarette. Ten minutes later he fell asleep.

A gray ghost-light met his eyes when he opened them again. Water hissed and seethed in the gorge and Black Horse Mountain was covered with mist. He stood up, his body stiff and aching from the damp-

ness. Not a sound except for the water rushing through the gorge.

He walked to its edge and looked down. Moss, rocks and white water below; he raised his eyes to the opposite side. From where he stood the log cabin wasn't visible. A good thing, for he could almost reach the cabin without being seen by Asturias, if he was there.

"But probably he's moved on, had his fun with the girl and—"

Fiala started the descent into the gorge, picking his way carefully on the slippery rocks when he stopped. A sudden chill took him, then he saw the girl, stark-naked, her white body moving in the water as if she were alive. But she wasn't. The branches of a tree that had fallen into the gorge had snared her long black hair, round and round she turned, propelled by the water rushing away from the falls and through the gorge.

But was this the Vega girl? He had no way of knowing and couldn't reach her. Let her be, he thought, descending to the gorge's bottom. Boulders lay in the water, steps to the opposite bank, but they were covered with wet moss and not for him to chance. A peeled and fallen tree twenty yards away bridged the water.

The odds looked better there

and were. Fiala crossed it, climbed out of the gorge, found himself on a promontory and a short distance from a small log cabin. The door stood open. A black gauze shadowed the interior from which no sound came.

Stepping forward, he stopped at the doorway. The cabin was empty. Turning now, he surveyed the ground and noted a half-dozen empty beer cans scattered about. Mendoza said Asturias had brought beer and a bottle of tequila with him. There was no sign of the bottle.

He's probably still carrying it, Fiala thought, and now he retraced his steps to the gorge's edge, following it back past the drowned girl. Fifty feet from the falls he stopped. Here the bank was scuffed as if a violent struggle had taken place. Was this where Asturias had killed the girl and flung her body into

the gorge? Probably. But where were her clothes?

Back he went to the cabin and searched it, searched the promontory, then on the far-side, leaning over the edge of a precipitous drop, he looked down. Far below he saw something red hanging from a dead tree. A skirt? Blouse? No matter which, it belonged to the dead girl.

Turning away, he retraced his steps, descended into the gorge, crossed the fallen tree and stopped, his eye caught by a pool at the side of the falls. Motionless giant Elephant Ears shadowed its stillness and suddenly he felt chilled, recalling the dream of yesterday. Here it was again, exactly as he had "seen" it, but where was the black jaguar that had sprung at him? As the thought came, he felt a movement, raised his eyes and there, under the white mane of the falls something moved in the shadowed mouth of a cave.

The jaguar, or Asturias? A second look and he realized his eyes were playing tricks with him.

MINUTES LATER Fiala mounted the burro. Meantime the sun had risen and the vast slopes of the mountain, green, silent and ominous, rose up before him. He rode on, believing there was a better chance that his quarry was somewhere on the plateau above, staying with friends who would, if he gave them a likely story, hide him from the law.

But he was not the law, only a poor peon, Fiala thought, heeling the burro, which didn't help. The brute kept his own pace, but soon enough the plateau was reached. A few adobe houses occupied it, and a log cabin which proved to be a store.

Dismounting in front of the cabin, he entered it, a primitive affair with clay slapped between the logs and, where the clay had fallen out, rags and paper to keep out the cold night-air. A rough counter and a few shelves with packaged foodstuff, nothing else. The storekeeper, a leathery old man wearing a sombrero, greeted Fiala with a quizzical look; strangers were rare here.

Fiala asked for a beer and got it in a can. Outside, he could feel the silence of the plateau. Not even a bird singing or insect ticking. Ominous.

"A peaceful place," he remarked, saluting the storekeeper. "Not like the city."

"You're from the city, senor?"

"From Montes. It's nothing but noise now, but twenty years ago—"

"You're far from home."

Nodding, Fiala lifted the can and tasted the beer.

"This is good after that ride up the mountain," he said, managing to grin. He was desperate now, for having come so far, he still didn't know how he was going to find Asturias and to ask questions wouldn't help. At the least, his quarry would be warned and vanish. And he might not get away from here alive, he thought. He'd better watch his step.

Again Fiala sipped the beer and saw the old fellow watching him. Obviously he was puzzled.

"You're looking for work, senor?" he finally said.

Fiala shook his head and waited.

"You're traveling?"

"Traveling for the rich. I have a small business back in Montes and many little mouths to feed," Fiala answered, watching the old man's face. The wrinkles around the man's eyes were netted tightly now, he was suspicious, wondering and already the question was forming on his lips.

Here it comes, Fiala thought, and the old man said, "If you're not looking for work or traveling, what are you doing here?"

"Seeking a friend of mine, Miguel Asturias. Do you know where I can find him?"

The lines of the store-keeper's face had set, his eyes were veiled. Finally he shrugged.

"He used to live here," he said, "but he went to the city."

Fiala wondered if it was a truthful answer. Perhaps the old fellow didn't know Asturias was back, or perhaps he did and was looking for some pesos to jog his memory. Fiala reached for his pocket and changed his mind. An offer of money might back-fire.

"Too bad," he said, "My friend did me a great favor and I have some money for him. Oh, well—"

A patter of feet sounded outside and two small children entered the cabin, a boy and a girl. The girl placed a clay dish and a coin on the counter.

"More peppers?" the old man said.

"Si."

"And candy?"

The little girl smiled and nodded. From a glass jar the store-keeper scooped out a half-dozen hot peppers and dropped them in the clay dish. From another jar he took some candy and handed it to the girl and boy. Thanking him, they started to leave and he stopped them. He turned to Fiala. "Your name, senor?"

"Pedro Mendoza."

The store-keeper turned back to the boy and said, "Tell your Uncle Miguel that his

friend, Senor Mendoza is here."

The children left and Fiala, ordering another beer, sat down on a stump of wood. A deep stillness flooded the plateau, it was hot out there, cool in the cabin. A minute passed, two. Fiala sipped his beer and footsteps alerted him.

Moments later Asturias stepped into the cabin. The store-keeper was facing him, Fiala to the side in peon dress. With a glance at him, Asturias turned back to the store-keeper and said, "Where's Mendoza?"

Beer can in his left hand, gun in the other, Fiala arose, identified himself and said, "Now turn around and put your hands against the wall."

"But—"

"I won't ask again!"

Asturias obeyed and Fiala relieved him of a pistol. "All right, let's go."

"What's this all about? What am I supposed to have done?"

"You know better than I. Let's go. Start walking."

A prod with the gun moved Asturias, but once outside, he stopped and refused to go on unless he heard the charges.

Fiala mounted the burro and said, "Walk and we'll talk."

"You're taking me to Montes?"

"But where else? As for the charges—walk. Now that's better. You're under arrest for the murder of the Englishman Robert Carter at the Hotel Imperial. Your girl friend Eugenia Vega accompanied him there, and you killed him when he wouldn't give up his money."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course, you don't. Your kind never does. Next, you're going to tell me you didn't murder your little girl friend."

"What?"

"Ah, there you go. The voice of innocence. So Eugenia Vega didn't come here with you?"

"No!"

"The evidence is otherwise."

"What evidence?"

"Her body. You took her to the cabin near the little falls and had a picnic with beer and tequila. You got her drunk, made love to her, then flung her into the gorge, naked and dead."

"All that when she wasn't with me."

"Her body's in the gorge, caught on a fallen tree. You didn't expect that. You thought she'd be swept away and battered on the rocks so no one would recognize her. It didn't happen that way."

"All right. The girl was with me, but I didn't kill her."

"She fell into the gorge without her clothes?"

"We were drinking at the cabin and she got tipsy and

wanted to go for a swim. I tried to stop her. She broke away and ran along the side of the gorge. I caught her and tried to hold her, but she turned into a wildcat, broke away and fell. That's how it happened."

"That almost sounds like the truth, but you threw her clothes off the cliff. Why?"

"Because I panicked. Anyway, she was dead and I didn't want to be blamed for something I didn't do."

"A battered corpse with no identity. That would leave you in the clear."

"I didn't want to be blamed."

"You mean you didn't want the girl to talk. She saw you kill the Englishman, so you brought her here and finished her off. Exit the witness who might talk, but it didn't work out and now you've two scores against you."

"Two if I killed the Englishman, but I didn't and therefore I had no reason to kill the girl."

"You only brought her here to play with her."

Asturias stopped and turned about. He was sweating, but there was a look of defiance on his face now. "You'll have to prove I killed the girl and you can't. The same goes for the Englishman whom I never saw."

"You didn't bring him to the hotel the other night?"

"How could I? I wasn't working."

"You were home?"

"No, I was playing dominoes in the Paloma restaurant."

"The girl was there?"

"Hanging around."

"Did someone come in and ask for her?"

"One of the taxi-drivers. Fat Vargas."

"He took her and the Englishman to the Imperial?"

"I don't know where he took them. Ask Vargas."

"The girl came back to the restaurant later?"

"About midnight."

"What happened then?"

"We drove here to have some fun."

As if accepting all this, Fiala shrugged and said, "If you're innocent, you have nothing to worry about, but meantime I have to take you in."

"With a gun at my back?"

"To protect myself in case your friends decide to interfere. You get the first bullet. Now start walking."

Cursing, Asturias turned and moved off. Soon they were off the plateau and headed downtrail. Both were silent, Fiala certain he had his man but troubled for he lacked proof and saw Asturias walking out of the lockup if he couldn't pin him down.

He must make him talk, Fiala thought, and from below came the sound of water now. They were nearing the little falls. Reaching the plateau, Fiala called a halt, dismounted and pointed to the edge of the gorge. Asturias stared at him questioningly.

"It's hot. Perhaps you'd like a drink," said Fiala.

"No, thanks."

"It's a long way to the foot of the mountain."

"I'll wait till we get there."

Casually Fiala waved the gun. "Anyway, go over there and take a look in the gorge."

"What for?"

"Never mind what for. Just go."

Sallow-faced .now, Asturias went to the gorge's edge. "See that tree in the water?" Fiala said in back of him.

An unnecessary question. Asturias had already seen the tree and Eugenia Vega, her long black hair entangled on a branch, her naked corpse rolling in the fast-moving water.

"A terrible way to die," Fiala said. "Do you think we can fish her out? No? Then I'll have some men come for her when we get to Montes. Let's go."

With Asturias leading the way they moved off again. The sun was high overhead now and a wet heat blanketed the mountain. Fiala was thankful for the

burro, but Asturias? With only his legs to carry him he was beginning to slow his steps. Finally he stopped and turned.

"What about a rest?" he said.

"When we reach the foot of the mountain."

"But—"

"Let's not argue, senor."

Asturias saw the gun pointed at him and started down the trail again while Fiala shook his head. He realized he'd been cruel, and forcing him to look at the drowned girl was worse. It shook him up, but more was coming and perhaps he'd talk.

Halfway down the mountain Asturias balked again, but the gun sent him on and they finally reached the village at the foot of the mountain. The only sign of life was a chicken pecking at a rotten orange.

Dismounting in front of the cantina, Fiala went inside, thanked the proprietor for the use of the burro and stepped outside with two bottles of beer. Exhausted, Asturias got up from a stone block where he was sitting.

"All right, let's go," Fiala said. "We'll drink these in my car. It's down the road."

Five minutes later, sitting in the car, Fiala opened one of the bottles, drank from it and turned to Asturias.

"You must be thirsty," he said, then lifted the bottle and drank from it again.

Asturias watched him in amazement, then said, "What about me?"

"Ah, you want a drink? Well, first we talk about the Englishman."

"We've already talked about him."

"But not enough. I want to hear more. Don't talk and you get nothing to drink. Furthermore, you'll walk to Montes while I drive behind you."

"You're crazy with the heat," Asturias snarled.

"Maybe, but you'll walk."

"I'll never make it."

"No? I'm sure you've seen them drag the dead bulls out of the arena. Well, that's the way I'll take you back to Montes."

The threat was enough.

"All right," Asturias said. "We'll talk."

"Good. Get behind the wheel and drive."

"What about the beer?"

"Not yet. Let's go."

As the car moved off and turned into the highway, Fiala took a long drink from the bottle, flung it out the window and said, "You're not changing your story?"

"No, senor."

"And you didn't go to the hotel?"

"No."

"You lie well, but suppose I

tell you that you were seen entering it from the garage. You and your girl friend went up the back stairs."

"Fat Vargas brought the girl there. You said so yourself."

"That's right. He dropped her at the main entrance, and that's all he did. The girl went up to the Englishman's room and got her money from him, but there was plenty more in his wallet and he was drunk so she went back to the restaurant and told you. Both of you returned to the hotel, expecting an easy touch, but the Englishman wasn't giving up his money, so you murdered him."

Asturias, silent now, only shook his head in feeble denial, and Fiala continued: "You left your knife in the Englishman, and that was your big mistake. Your wife identified it. Perhaps she wouldn't have, but when she heard you ran off with the girl. . ." Fiala paused and shrugged: "Do I have to add anything more, senor?"

Braking the car, Asturias let out his breath. "Nothing more," he answered. "I killed the Englishman."

"And the girl?"

"Her too." Asturias turned, the light had gone out of his eyes.

"Now may I have the beer?" he said.

Fiala handed over the bottle and sighed with relief. Two confessions from Asturias, yet no one had seen him enter the hotel, nor had his wife identified the knife. With a trick older than himself, the detective had trapped his quarry.

In the Next Issue:

RIDE TO THE KILLING

Featuring VICTOR FIALA

by HAL ELLSON

When the gringo desert rat stumbled into town and then as quickly stumbled back out and to his death, Victor Fiala knew with a certainty just who had robbed the corpse. It was who had killed the stranger that had to be learned—and fast, before the evidence evaporated!

DAY SHIFT

by

JOHN LUTZ

Ransby took pride in his burglaries—and then he made the mistake of stealing from a man who dealt in surprises.

RANSBY WAITED in the bushes. The night was dark and warm, and Ransby's clothing was like the night. Only not too like the night, for he was a true professional, and even a professional—especially a professional—allows for the possibility of being stopped.

So Ransby's lightweight jacket was dark green, his slacks and shoes black, functional for concealment yet not too conspicuous in their purpose if he were spotted in the area of his crime. And when the jacket was unzipped it would reveal a loud and innocent appearing yellow striped shirt.

But now the jacket was zipped to the neck, and Ransby

was waiting in the shrubbery of 125 Edgemont Lane. From the highway to the east he could hear the very occasional distant whine of tires; other than that the well-to-do subdivision on the south end of town was quiet. Each sprawling house stood in snobbish solitude on its large lot. Though in the fifty thousand dollar class, the builder had designed the houses to appear larger and more expensive. Prestige was what he was selling and he knew it.

125 had prestige. It was a long brick ranch house with a circular patio and an elaborate entrance. Outside the oversize garage a Cadillac and a small foreign car were parked as if on display. The windows were dark but for a yellowish glow from a night light in the rear. Ransby appreciated that light as he admired the house. It was always good when his victims unknowingly cooperated by leaving on an inside light.

He glanced at his wristwatch. Three-seventeen. The patrol car wasn't due to make its tour through the subdivision for another twenty minutes. Miles of time.

Then the house's outside air conditioning unit clicked on and began to hum, and Ransby moved quickly and gracefully to the window he'd chosen earlier. The adhesive tape to prevent the cut section of glass from falling out prematurely, the soaped glass cutter to prevent any squealing, a gloved hand reaching in and flipping the latch, opening the window carefully, and soon after he was inside.

The room was dark, but Ransby had figured the layout of the house from outside. When he drew his small pen light from his pocket and flicked it on, he was pleased but not surprised to find he was in the dining room.

He covered the lighted end of the pen light with his gloved fingers to allow only the feeblest glow as he made his way down the carpeted hall on his soft soled shoes. The thermostat was in the hall, and he paused and turned it down to sixty-five. He turned left, toward the front of the house and the master bedroom, whatever slight noises he made covered by the air conditioner's steady low hum.

The master bedroom was large. A man and a woman were sleeping in a king sized bed, the woman on her stomach, the man lying on his back with one arm hanging limply down off the side of the mattress. The man was heavy-set and dark, the woman blonde, with one slender pale

leg protruding from beneath the covers.

Ransby stood very still and listened to their breathing. He was an expert on the rhythms of sleep-breathing. These two were sleeping soundly, he decided, the man's breathing deep and regular, the woman's almost as deep, a slightly quicker tempo. Ransby fixed the soft double rhythm of their breathing in his mind, and as he went about his business he was unconsciously but constantly aware of it.

It was always safer, Ransby had decided, to work in the early morning hours while his victims were home and in deepest sleep. He would rather have them there, sleeping and harmless where he could keep an eye on them, than have them arrive home and surprise him in the midst of his work.

Ransby knew the most likely places to look. He found the woman's jewelry box quickly in a top dresser drawer. A woman of this class seldom had a musical jewelry box, but he made sure of that before he lowered the leather chest to the floor and opened it. Clenching the pen light in his teeth like a cigar, he kept it trained with practiced ease on the box as he silently sorted the jewlery with his fingers and pocketed what he wanted. There were two nice

dinner rings, a pearl necklace and some diamond earrings. The rest of the stuff was cheap, but a few pieces were worth taking.

Then he checked the top of the dresser and saw nothing but a vanity mirror and an array of perfume bottles. Walking to the bed, he trained the light for a second on the woman's left hand. No rings. Then he saw them on the bedside table and scooped them up. Blue diamond. Expensive stuff, worth at least a couple hundred hot. Ransby pocketed the rings and went to the dresser near the closet door.

The man's wallet, keys and some loose change were lying in a long wooden tray atop the dresser. Ransby's hands, nimble even in his cotton gloves, quickly flipped open the wallet and rifled the bills as he pocketed them. Fifty-six dollars. Automatically he removed the credit cards and slid them into his pocket alongside the bills. If sold immediately to a certain specialist he knew, they'd bring a fair price. An expensive gold wristwatch went onto Ransby's wrist then halfway up his forearm beneath his jacket sleeve.

Ransby froze as the woman's breathing quickened. There was a rustling of sheets and he watched her turn onto her side and moan softly as her breathing evened out again. The man hadn't stirred.

Ransby smiled and again flipped open the man's wallet to an identification card. James Keller. Ransby looked at the sprawled, pajama-clad form disdainfully. What fools the James Kellers of this world were! He'd worked all his life to get what he had, and now, in a short night's work, it was Ransby's. Ransby could roam Keller's home, choose what he wanted.

Even the fool's wife could be his if he chose. Ransby's gaze went to the extended pale leg. There was no theft insurance to cover what he could take from the woman. Not that he would ever touch her, for Ransby was a professional, a businessman, not a rapist. There was simply great satisfaction in knowing that everything the fool had worked to possess was vulnerable. It was merely a matter of ethics.

With a last look at the woman, Ransby left the master bedroom and located a panelled den with a desk against one wall. He rummaged through the drawers deftly, finding another roll of bills behind some envelopes. There was also a small tape recorder that fit nicely into his jacket pocket. He only glanced at the portable

TV, for it was his practice never to steal anything he had to carry. An expensive looking fountain pen struck his fancy and was clipped into his breast pocket.

Then Ransby checked his own wristwatch. Ten minutes before the patrol car was due in the area. Time for him to leave with a safe margin for error. He made his way back to the dining room window he'd entered and slipped outside.

A lithe shadow among shadows, Ransby moved stealthily through the tree-studded back yard, removing his cotton gloves and stuffing them carefully into his pocket along with his pen light and the other tools of his profitable trade.

Like a finely trained athlete, he smoothly swung himself over the chain link fence and jogged across a small park-like area to the next block where his car was parked near other cars belonging probably to someone's guests or relatives. When he reached the sidewalk he unzipped his jacket to reveal his bright yellow shirt and began to walk casually the half block to his car.

Ransby swallowed but didn't break stride or glance around. He continued walking, past his car, listening to the soft rushing tick of the engine and the low rubbery sound of the car cruising behind him. Taking a deep breath, he whistled, loud, then turned and pretended to notice the patrol car for the first time. The car gained slight speed, stopped smoothly ten feet in front of him at the curb.

"Late to be walking," a young officer observed with a polite smile. It was a wealthy area.

Ransby approached the car with his own smile. "Have you seen a tiny apricot colored poodle? Fluffles is his name."

"No, sir," the officer said. "He run away?"

Ransby nodded. "I think he's upset because my wife scolded him." He moved closer to the car and leaned with his hand on the roof. Heat drifted back from the gleaming hood. "My name's Jim Keller, from 125 Edgemont, next block over. If you do run across him I'd appreciate it if you'd notify me."

The young officer glanced at his partner.

"Keller, did you say?" the older officer behind the wheel asked.

Ransby nodded. "The dog's name is Fluffles." He straightened and pretended to peer around, listening to the driver saying something he couldn't make out into the radio mike.

"Dog run away often?" the young officer asked.

"When he's upset," Ransby

said, suitably embarrassed.

An awkward glance gained weight, stretched. Inside the car the radio crackled to electronic life, there were voices, then more silence. Ransby had heard the words "One twenty-five Edgemont Lane. . ." The young officer was staring at him. Then on came the polite smile. "Hope you find your dog, Mr. Keller. We'll keep a sharp eye out for him."

"I sure appreciate it," Ransby said as the car glided away. He watched it turn the corner.

When he was in his own car, doing sixty-five on the interstate highway, he felt the tension finally sag in him and he grinned. Risk. That was part of the business, a part you had to accept. The real James Keller didn't have to worry about that kind of risk, probably wouldn't have the nerve to live with it. He would continue plodding on in his thankless coat-and-tie business world, never accepting the simple fact that to get, all you had to do was take.

The burglary would be reported in the morning, maybe make a short column in the paper way back on page ten E. Page one would be concerned with the nationwide growing crime wave, probably. And the editorial page would ask how it could be stopped and wonder at the cause of it.

Why shouldn't the wealth be spread about a bit, Ransby thought as he turned onto the wide concrete exit ramp to a downtown street. He was entitled to his share. It was a fast world, getting faster all the time, and a man had to keep up. Let the Kellers of the world sow—the Ransbys of the world would reap!

As the car passed a lighted men's shop window Ransby's gaze fixed on one of the latest style suits and a display of dress shirts. His wardrobe could use a little lift; maybe he'd see about a new suit tomorrow.

After the police had finished, James Keller called his insurance man. He stood at the phone in his spacious kitchen as he talked, sipping his morning coffee. "Yes. . .everything's been reported to the police," he was saying. "He got the diamond brooch my wife's mother gave her. It's insured for five thousand dollars, I believe. Yes, I'll send you a list. Yes. . ."

He replaced the receiver and finished his coffee before going into the bedroom and opening the bottom drawer of his wife's dresser to make sure the brooch was still in its usual place wrapped in its soft cloth. He looked at it admiringly for a moment then slipped it into his

pocket to place later in a safety deposit box.

"Are you sure it was safe to report the brooch stolen?" his wife asked him as she stood at her dresser mirror arranging her blonde hair. "If the police do catch the burglar he might deny stealing it."

Keller smiled into the eyes of her reflection. "Of course it was safe," he assured her. "The tape recorder I was going to send to Big Andy Brandon was stolen too."

His wife's reflection smiled back at him.

"We don't have to worry about our burglar being caught," Keller said. "As soon as he touches one of the control buttons on that tape recorder he'll be in the middle of an explosion. I'll just have to think of something else to stop Brandon on that business deal." He stooped to adjust his tie in the mirror before leaving for the office.

"I don't understand why they do it," he mused to his wife. "Sneaking around in the middle of the night like that, when there are so many easier ways."

COMING SOON and Exclusively Yours—

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Gangbuster

FRANK COSTELLO;
Minister of the Underworld

by DAVID MAZROFF

He rode the crest of gangland's wave, guiding, directing, always using his considerable talents for the benefit of murderers and the syndicate boys. He pushed and shoved and hired death in his travel to the top, and he was determined to stay there—life itself was a cheap commodity for this million dollar hood!

A Small Circle of Friends

There were five witnesses to the shooting, but none of them would talk. Then Leschi learned of the strange and deadly bond that held the five together in murder's arms. . .

by JERRY JACOBSON

FROM THE START it had been a curious sort of killing, set with characters and circumstances quite like none other Sam Leschi had come across in his fourteen years as a police detective.

The call came into Homicide Division at 3:16 p.m. of a sultry summer afternoon, another curiosity to be placed atop what would become a mountain of curiosities.

Human beings rarely killed each other in the afternoon; and seldom in hot weather; and not often on Saturdays. This was the best of time and circumstance for the horrors of head-on collisions on freeways, and for lake drownings and for death from heat prostration. But not for murder by pistol among a small circle of friends.

And it had been, literally, a circle of friends; six friends gathered in Saturday afternoon sport around a card table in an apartment unit at Forty-o-five, one of the city's massive apartment module-style com-

plexes devoted exclusively to the hedonistic pleasures of the new mover-and-shaker of the 70s, the swinging single. Nestled outside of the city's noise and filth and rat-race amid elms, duck ponds and bridle paths, it was the new symbol cherished by those who saw themselves as eternally adolescent—forever young, unmarried and upward bound.

For an answer to what the apartment's name, Forty-o-five, related to, Leschi went to Strowmeyer, a modish dressed and long haired detective who was squeezing in courses at law school at night in addition to assisting the senior detectives on cases. Strowmeyer looked at him with all the incredibility of seeing original Cro-Magnon man emerging from the darkness of a cave. The apartment's name meant neither the owners or the tenants wanted anyone over forty-five marring the landscape or throwing wet blankets over the party atmosphere which eternally prevailed at places like Forty-o-five.

"You aren't seriously thinking of moving into a place like that are you, Lieutenant Leschi? The pace and heavy hedonism could kill an older man."

Leschi simply grinned at Strowmeyer across the gulf between their desks and put his nose back into the preliminary report on the killing.

The dead man was Julius Evans, thirty-two, unmarried, and an insurance salesman. A quick check revealed he had no local police record; the F.B.I. would add or detract from that record later.

Leschi's regular partner was on leave-days, which meant Leschi had been biding time and troubleshooting all over the building. The watch commander told him to take Strowmeyer along on the investigation. At a place like Forty-o-five, a younger detective would have a special feel for things. Leschi displayed another tight grin and said he would be charmed.

Leschi drove. He had a son nineteen who didn't look any younger than Strowmeyer and he handled a car like Mario Andretti picking up lost ground and so Leschi drove. They didn't trust anybody over thirty; Leschi didn't trust anybody under.

"This is about the time of day they happen, all right," Strowmeyer said idly on the drive out to the northern suburbs.

"The time of day *what* happens?" Sam Leschi asked, a little sour that the kid was already trying to nail him for a lightweight in the deduction department.

"Beefs over card games," Strowmeyer said.

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, a lot of these private poker games begin after the bars close on Friday nights." Leschi nodded.

The city had an ordinance against gambling, but most of the detectives in the department looked the other way when it came to penny-ante poker among friends in private residences. These were only busted when a rumor was plucked out of the grapevine that a place was selling liquor by the drink, or the house was taking a percentage, or someone was thoughtfully providing female companionship at a nominal fee. Then they'd put an agent in and turn a bust of everybody and everything on the premises.

"If that's the case with this little get-together," Strowmeyer was going on, "then you've got twelve hours of solid poker-playing, with nobody getting much sleep since they went to work the morning before."

"Ergo, many short tempers and perhaps a few heavy losers," said Leschi.

"Ergo, a mid-afternoon beef, a pistol shot and a broken link in the small circle of friends at a friendly poker game. What's the dope on the deceased, this Julius Evans?"

"No trouble here in town. But maybe he does his trouble-making out of town. Insurance salesman, thirty-two, single."

Strowmeyer nodded and pointed out a roadside marker pointing the direction, right, to Forty-o-five. "Doesn't figure to have a record out of town, either."

Leschi scowled at his pick-up partner in the rear view mirror. "You going to start dragging out all this socio-psychology business on me, kid? Because I warn you kid, people begin talking to me using words larger than one syllable, I crawl into my shirt pocket and stay there until they go away."

"Okay, Lieutenant. Street language. Fact: people usually take their dirty laundry with them. So if Evans shows up clean here, it's a pretty good bet he's clean all the way around."

"We'll count our dirty laundry after we've dumped it all out and checked it over."

Judging from the exterior view of the dark, rich wood buildings and immaculate green lawns, Leschi had a feeling dirty laundry there wasn't even allowed. There was a gate guard and even a small guardhouse and Leschi spotted the small eye of a video tape cam-

era trained on the entrance to record arriving and departing automobiles and occupants for posterity.

The guard remained inside his cubicle as a city patrolman and a man in a gold mod suit with wide lapels and a white turtleneck came out to greet their arrival.

"George Favor," greeted the man in the upward-bound clothes. "Owner and manager. I notified the police after being told of the shooting by one of the tenants."

"You yourself weren't present at the incident."

"No, I wasn't. We've had volleyball and tennis tournaments going on all day on the other side of the complex. I've been keeping the elimination ladder up to date and officiating where I was needed. Trish Hanlan tracked me down to tell me there'd been a shooting."

"In whose unit did the shooting take place?"

The patrolman took out his notebook and cleared his throat. "Unit 36. That's the third module from the left there. Beginning from the south end of the duck pond and working north up this side."

Leschi nodded. The units wrapped the duck pond, the dozen on this side with their backs to them, the dozen or so on the opposite shore facing.

"That unit was occupied by the deceased, Julius Evans. The girl who notified Mr. Favor here, Trish Hanlan, lives with a girlfriend in Unit 126, other side of the pond. From what I gather, the same group of six played poker together at least a couple times a week, with two or three others who sit down intermittently. I've taken down the entire list, with their units and telephone numbers. I sent them all back to their apartments, Lieutenant. I mean, nobody was admitting to killing Evans, so I didn't see any reason to keep them all standing around and getting in the way."

"You did the right thing," said young Strowmeyer, at last, Leschi seeing he was itching to get into the conversation.

"Coroner's ambulance is on the way, is it?" Leschi asked the patrolman.

"Any minute, sir."

"You stay here at the gate and direct them, will you? Mr. Favor, suppose you take us down to the scene of the crime."

"Right this way, Lieutenant. Lieutenants."

Leschi could see Strowmeyer grimace over being considered an after-thought, but he wasn't worried about him hanging back like a wallflower on this case. Leschi was known around the department as a man who

liked aggressive investigation by the younger detectives and who always wrote favorable remarks about active work in his reports.

The walk to the apartment modules was a good hundred yards. It was a pleasant afternoon all about. Everything pleasant except a murder.

"What kind of tenants do you get here, Mr. Favor?" Leschi asked as they headed for Unit 36. "Is the swinger label everybody attaches to places like Forty-o-five justified and accurate?"

"Pure Lotus Land," breezed Favor, with the touch of the adman in his maple syrup voice. "Two hundred and fifty units, full occupancy, with fifty waiting. No one married, no one over forty-five, no children. Doctors, lawyers, bank veeps, business execs, television people, radio program directors and disc jockeys."

"No riff-raff," said Leschi.

"We have a few of what we call G.P.s," said Favor, with a slur.

"G.P.s?"

"Great Pretenders. People who would like to qualify as swingers, but can't pay full freight. Rents start at one hundred-ninety-a-month here for a one-bedroom, you know. Easy enough for any single person to pony up, but after that, the Great Pretenders find the front they put up wearing thin enough to see through."

"And who would classify as a G.P.?" Leschi asked.

"A host of types," said Favor. "The last one to feel the heat and run for his pride was a roly-poly guy who called himself the general manager of one of those fast-food hamburger places. You know the type. The kind who stands around a few teen-aged countermen making sure the sesame seeds don't fall off the buns and the automatic potato pealer doesn't slip a gear during the noontime rush. Can you believe the first week he was here, he slipped cards under everybody's door entitling the bearer to a free forty-two cent burger and nineteen cent soft drink? How's that for class?"

"Any Great Pretenders here now?" Leschi asked.

"God Himself forbid, a dozen or so, yes," said Favor. "Their turnover is fast, but they're eternal as Rome itself. They aren't hard to spot. The guy with the two hundred dollar Head skis on a rack on a ten-year-old sedan. The secretaries who pal up three or four to a unit and take turns wearing the two hundred dollar cocktail dress out to dinner. The guy with the Botany 500 wardrobe, the Maserati automobile, but

no telephone, or it's just been taken out and he explains he did it himself for the privacy."

"What kind of jobs would Great Pretenders have?" Strowmeyer got in finally. "Used car salesmen, department store clerks, that type?"

"All salesmen are considered G.P. types," said Favor, looking too weary now to want to continue such a painful conversation. "As are laborers, warehousemen, teachers below the college level, and nearly all types of civil servants. All non-professional types."

"What about the dead man?" Leschi asked. "Genuine swinger or G.P.?"

"Somewhere in between I'd say. A salesman, but one with at least a little dignity. I've never much cared for insurance people as tenants. They always seem to have the hustle on. Policy selling, night and day."

"What about Evans?"

"A real pusher type with the insurance," said Favor. "Wouldn't know how to have a good time if it came up and sat down on the bridge of his nose. One-track mind. I've talked with him. You get the feeling every conversation with him is solely directed to get your name on a dotted line. He didn't socialize much but his absence wasn't mourned by the rest of the tenants. Evans was the kind of guy who'd join a skiing trip to, say Aspen, just to hang around the lodge selling accident policies."

"Tell me about the five others at the card game besides the deceased," asked Leschi, referring now to the patrolman's notes. "What about Trish Hanlan, the young lady who notified you of the killing?"

"Been at Forty-o-five about a year," Favor said. "About twenty-three, divorced, no children, an anonymous steno-secretary someplace in town. High-piled cotton-candy hair-do about three years out of step, laughs and drinks too much."

"What about Carl Lind."

"Lind. Yes. Auto mechanic for a new car dealership. Prestigious among the grease monkey set, but pretty much of a boorish gorilla around the Forty-o-five. Comes on with the women by chug-a-lugging beer and explaining about compressors and turbines. When he leaves a room you can almost record the collective sigh of relief on a seismograph."

"The only other woman in the room at the time of the shooting was Tula Graham. Can you tell us anything about her?"

"Works for a travel agency, about thirty, divorcee. Her three kids live with a mother-in-law on the other side of

town. Very bad form. Gross husband-hunter. Takes sailing lessons from the parks department, subscribes to Great Books series, has copies of *Ms.* all over her apartment, but doesn't believe a word the libbers are putting out. Heavy drinker, out of frustration about not being able to pluck off an eligible man."

"In other words, a definite G.P.," said Strowmeyer.

"Gold seal. She's in the wrong place. Swingers run at the first hint of marriage. That's what it's all about here. Hedonism, second adolescence, and heterosexual relationships without strings and without marital motives."

"Both the women," said Strowmeyer. "Were they good card players?"

"I don't know how good, but they were pretty steady about it. They found themselves on the rim of the real action at Forty-o-five and their friendships with Evans and Carl Lind might have been a little like water finding its own level. None of them mixed much in the social whirl here. The parties, the ski trips, the sports tournaments, the regular sort of activities."

"The other two men," said Leschi now. "This Elwin Maples."

"Another G.P. type," said

Favor. "The phony genius and philosopher type. Spouted off stuff like trigonometric funcfions, and Tietze's extension theorem, but couldn't put an understandable English sentence together if it meant his life. Chess fancier, though half the people who played him could beat him while concen-

trating on three other things at the same time. Bad temper and generally avoided."

"What does Maples do for a living?" asked Strowmeyer, as the three of them reached the alcoved front door of Unit 36.

"You name it and Maples has probably done it for a week or two, until he found out he wasn't going to be able to own or run the company overnight and quit. Professional night university student, but I don't think he's got a degree yet. Don't even know why he lives here, unless it's just to sneer at the system and wish he had the stuff to be a part of it. Very heavy poker player. Dice, too. All the short-cuts to success, without any of the time or effort."

"And the last male at the game," said Leschi. "Gardner VanDyne."

"Some name, huh?" said Favor. "I thought I had a freaky handle. Don't know much at all about VanDyne. Came here about two years ago, leases by the quarter, pays his rent on the dot. No trouble out of him, but he's not seen much in the company of the regular crowd here, either."

"Job?"

"Must be something you could write home about. The guy drives a $7,000 Porsche and his unit's got the best stereo set-up money can buy. Doesn't dress Botony 500, but he's no slouch off the plain pipe rack either. I think I remember somebody telling me about money in the family tree. There must be a little of it falling off a low limb and right into his lap."

Leschi and Strowmeyer showed identification to a patrolman on guard outside Unit 36, who showed them inside and down a brief entry hall and into the livingroom. The body of Julius Evans lay a few feet short of a set of sliding windows which led to a private patio overlooking the duck pond. He was on his back. Two irregular splotches of drying blood stained his sports shirt, one over the area of his heart, the second low on his left side. Behind the body, a bullethole made a splintered circle in the glass, from the shot which had passed through the fleshy part of Evans' body. Evans' chair hadn't been toppled. It appeared he had stood and taken a step to the side, for whatever reason, before he'd been shot.

Leschi took down George Favor's unit number and telephone, told him he could leave but to remain available throughout the afternoon and sent the patrolman back outside.

When they were alone, Les-

chi said to Strowmeyer, "Play much poker in college?"

"Passed a little time at it."

"What kind of game was going on here?" Nothing on the oval table looked disturbed, except for the absence of money and personal effects which the players had snatched up after the shooting.

"Dealer was the player seated to the right of Julius Evans," observed young Strowmeyer. "At least the unused pack is at that place."

Cards were distributed to all six places at the table, some face-up, some dealt down.

"A three-card game of some kind," said Strowmeyer, after a minute's observation. "The dealer and the player to the dealer's right hadn't been dealt their third cards. The way it goes down, the killing took place just after the player directly across from Evans' received his third card. Must have been some sort of argument at that point, something big enough and serious enough to get Evans two slugs. Angle of entry says the player who fired the shots had to have been seated directly across from Evans, or right or left of that. How am I doing so far, boss man?"

Leschi cracked him a small grin. "Elementary, but not bad for a college-trained cop. What about the type of card game they were playing? A three-card game. Ring any old collegiate bells?"

"It wasn't blackjack," said Strowmeyer. "Every player's been dealt two down-cards, but only one other card face-up. Six players, you'd expect a couple of them to get hit with a few more cards. And the dealer shows two cards down. In blackjack, the dealer's second card is shown."

"You familiar with any other three-card games? Or do we just stand here looking like two guys waiting for a bus?"

"Could have been a game we used to call Fits," Strowmeyer said.

"Fits? What kind of game is that? Where the losers have aberrations after losing?"

"It can grow to that," said Strowmeyer. "Pretty tense kind of game. The way it's played, every player antes, usually a buck. That buys you two cards, face-down, all the way around the table. Then, with the Ace high and the Deuce low, you try to fit a third card between your first two, betting a portion of all of the pot. Each player bets in turn, from the dealer's left and the game continues until the pot has been wiped clean. From a simple beginning to a greedy cutthroat finish."

"How so?"

"Figure it out, Lieutenant Leschi. A couple of bad rounds of cards for everyone and a few good-sized bets and you've got a big pot and six hungry people. Say, for instance, you're holding a nearly unbeatable hand, a deuce and a jack. The only cards that can beat you are the queen, king and the ace. Good odds in your favor. Say there's fifty dollars in the pot. And say you bet thirty dollars of it, which is a reasonable bet. Bang! Up pops one of the three cards you don't need and you've lost and the pot's been sweetened by thirty dollars."

"I see what you mean," Leschi said. "Let's run it out, then. The pot builds to a pretty hefty pile and it comes around to the player seated opposite Julius Evans, the last player to receive his third card. By this time, tempers and greed are running higher than a good pro halfback breaking ankle tackles. The player opposite Evans gets a winning hand. . ."

Strowmeyer to confirm that, turned over the two cards in question. "An ace and a deuce. And a ten-spot dealt face up. A nearly unbeatable hand and the ten makes him a winner."

"At this point," continued Leschi, extending the premise, "Evans rises to a point of some sort of contention."

"Or the player opposite does, which brings Evans to his feet. The discussion continues, tempers get out of control, the player opposite Evans pulls a pistol. Bang-bang."

"Table looks too clean to me," said Sam Leschi.

Strowmeyer wasn't catching on right away. "Clean?"

"Where are the drinking glasses? The beer cans? The ash trays?"

"I'll take a check in the kitchen," said young Strowmeyer, wandering off down a hallway. "First door on the right here. Better come and take a look, Lieutenant."

It was a small kitchen. It was also a place where additional moves to hide the identity of a killer had taken place. A plastic drainer overflowed with drinking glasses and ash trays, also spotless and clean.

"Another charming development," said Strowmeyer. "Looks like everybody pitched in to clear the table and clean evidence of fingerprints after Evans was killed."

"Which means we know approximately where the shots were fired from," said Leschi dismally, "but we're being kept from learning who was sitting in which seat at the card game."

"And we're also being kept from finding the murder weapon. Killer took it out of

Evans' apartment while Trish Hanlan was looking up George Favor."

"Which is another curious ploy," said Leschi as they returned to the livingroom, where Leschi picked up the telephone receiver, listened a moment and then put it back down. "The telephone is connected and yet no one used it to call the police. Instead, they sent the Hanlan girl halfway around the complex to look up George Favor."

"...to allow the killer time to dispose of the pistol and get back to Evans' apartment," added Strowmeyer.

"...while the rest of them cleared the card table and cleaned all the ash trays and glasses and came to an agreement to say nothing about the killing to anyone."

"Nobody was driving, officer," said Strowmeyer, "we were all in the back seat singing."

"And that's perhaps the biggest puzzle of all," Sam Leschi mused. "They all know they could be prosecuted for obstruction of justice and complicity to cover up an act of murder, but they're all willing to take that risk to protect Evans' murderer."

"Among a small circle of friends," put in Strowmeyer, "a thing like that's been known to happen."

"Among friends, yes. But I wonder what a psychiatrist would say about this particular circle? Would he term them friends? I don't think so. I think he'd tell us these six people were as far apart from each other as any six people on the face of the earth, even in each other's company."

"How do you make that, Lieutenant Leschi?"

"Well let's look at them individually for a moment," Leschi told his young partner. "An out-of-step steno secretary, an automotive mechanic with no visible success professionally or with women, a divorcee unsuccessfully attempting to hide the fact of her family, a drifter professional university type, and some mixed-up rich kid spoiled by a doting uncle but shunned by most of his affluent, upward-bound neighbors. And a dead insurance salesman who never knew how to turn off the sales pitch to win friends and influence people."

Young Hollis Strowmeyer ran a hand through a field of rich, blonde hair. Leschi wondered if leaving off wearing his hat for a while would re-sprout some of his own thinning brown hair. He rejected the tedious notion. It would mean giving up four or five very dapper-looking hats.

"What do they have in com-

mon, you mean," said Strowmeyer at long last.

"Exactly." He wanted to give the kid all the time he needed. He was green at this business and the theorizing would teach him the importance of examining a case from all its angles, seen and unseen.

"Well, for one thing," Strowmeyer ventured after a minute's thought, "all of these people, the dead man included, were more or less on the outside of the action here. All loner types, drifters and daydreamers, maybe mild schizoid types. Drop-outs from high school or college and people who never started families or saw their stars aborted. And people who never got any kind of a strong hold on careers."

"Good so far," complimented Sam Leschi. "What else do they have in common?"

"Well, they appear to be loners who found a small circle of other loners to be. . .alone with. People who wouldn't threaten their self-esteem, distorted though that self-esteem was. Less interaction with the others at Forty-o-five, the less threat and stress."

"Would you say these six people represented a sort of. . .well. . .a sort of commune in the modern sense?" asked Sam Leschi.

Strowmeyer thought about that a minute and then answered, "Well, not in the hippy-sense of living on a deserted farm and growing vegetables and pot and having each others' nameless children. But a commune, all the same. They seemed to have formed a little society all their own, based on their penchants for playing cards and their need to socialize."

"And they now have one other thing in common," said Sam Leschi.

"Their mutual protection of a murderer, for reason or reasons still unknown."

"We discover that mutual motive and we find our killer."

The coroner's men and the lab team were moving into the apartment now. Sam Leschi and his young partner moved back into the kitchen to give them elbow room.

"Well," said Strowmeyer, after he'd opened them both a can of cold beer from Evans' refrigerator, "at least we'll be able to put in our report that we found a couple things here with fingerprints on them, even if they're our own. How do you want to split up this list of suspects for questioning?"

"Let's hold off that until after the weekend," Leschi said. "They're like five tortoises who've crawled back into their shells now. If we get any

stories out of them, chances are we won't be able to tell one from another."

"I get you, Lieutenant Leschi. Give them a little time to stew over whether conspiracy to murder is such a wise idea."

"While it gives us a little time to do some deeper checking into their backgrounds."

THE THEORY looked good on paper, but it washed out to something less than successful. None of the five suspects had so much as the faintest black mark against his or her record. There wasn't even an outstanding traffic warrant among them.

As for the questioning, Leschi thought it wiser to let young Strowmeyer take the two women while he himself interrogated the men. There was a chance two frustrated young females might turn more quickly to putty in the hands of a young, handsome, eligible detective.

He should have known better. Not only had their sensibilities turned to implacable stone, their stories were perfect carbon copies of those told by the three males.

No one remembered where he or she had sat during the card game. No one was saying how the argument began, who started it and who had been involved in it besides the dead Julius Evans. No one knew who had cleaned the glasses and the ash trays, nor who had fired the pistol, nor where the murder weapon was now. And no one was saying what had transpired in that apartment after Trish Hanlan was sent to tell George Favor of the killing.

The voice of one was the strong, perfect echo of the others. They were hanging together. Whatever the outcome and for whatever reasons, the pack of them was sticking together right to the sweet or bitter end.

On Wednesday, four days after the killing, Leschi went to the district attorney. He wanted indictments for murder drawn against all five suspects. Only that intense kind of heat would drive one or all of them from the kitchen and shake loose the real story of what had happened that Saturday afternoon over a card game among a small circle of friends.

When Sam Leschi's temper had subsided, the district attorney made him see clearly the futility of such a move. The circumstances surrounding the murder were conspiratorial enough to get a judge's signature on five indictments of arrest, but the subsequent trial would be a fiasco. Without any proofs or witnesses, a pro-

secutor wouldn't have a thing to sell to a jury but his good name and sparkling personality.

The defense would have a field day. And when it was all over five individuals would walk from that courtroom acquitted of any crime or conspiracy to commit one, free and clear in the knowledge that never again could they be tried for the murder of Julius Evans, or for the crime of conspiring to protect his killer.

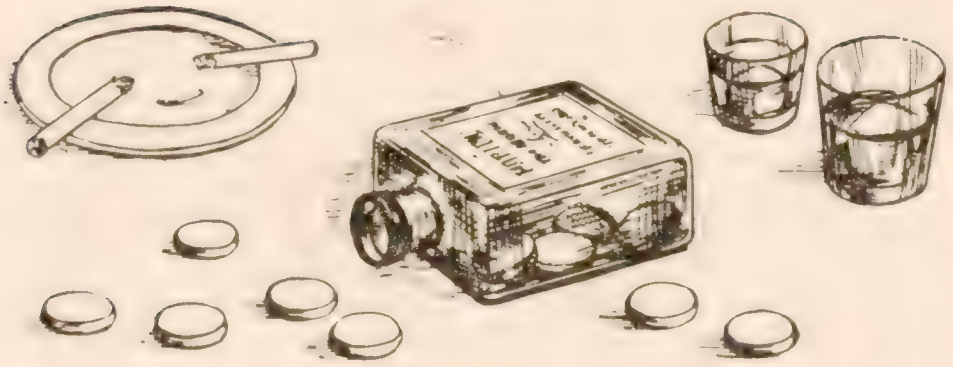
They *were* able to accomplish one piece of touchy business. George Favor, the owner of Forty-o-five was pressing to have the five evicted from their units because the place was beginning to get a reputation. Leschi wasn't quite so impatient with Favor as he had been with the district attorney. Carefully and reasonably, he explained to Favor that it would make Leschi's job easier and the five could be kept under surveillance better if they weren't forced into scattering to the four corners of the city. If any one of them cut and run, he told Favor, he wanted the cutting and running done of their own free but troubled will. George Favor relented, agreeing to extend the tenancy of the five suspects for the time being. It was a slender victory.

By the end of the week, the surveillance of the five suspects revealed only five humans who were being extremely careful not to stray from the routine of their lives.

Trish Hanlan worked at her steno-secretary job at the city's port commission office on the waterfront, ate lunch at her desk or alone at one of the outdoor seafood bars along the docks area, and drove home immediately after work.

Carl Lind, the mechanic, wasn't missing any work and wasn't straying any farther from home than an occasional visit to one or another of the city's singles' bars or taverns, where he played eight-ball pool and took an occasional turn on a dance floor with a young woman, none of whom he ever escorted home or elsewhere.

As for Tula Graham, her job at the travel agency was more mobile than the jobs of the others, but her movements were discernible and above board. It seemed her primary responsibility was to appear before civic and business groups to show short travel films followed by short talks on the wonders of places like Micronesia and Scotland and New Zealand, which could be inexpensively packaged by Horizon Vacation Tours Inc. Once a week she visited her children. The rest of her time was spent



in a blatant frenzy of lunch and coffee dates with men, both married and single, with an occasional dinner engagement.

Leschi was depressed by the endless rounds of seduction frequently ending in sad hotel rooms or overnight stays at her apartment. Without even knowing or sensing, she had become a common prostitute, when her only real motive for these shabby evenings was to pluck off a husband. She was being made a fool by every man she met; who knew how widely her name and telephone number had been distributed in the name of a good time?

Elwin Maples wasn't a name widely distributed or known, but there was about him a sort of perverse notoriety, Strowmeyer learned. During the days, he drove a truck for a small local firm which manufactured pretzels and potato chips. A routing clerk said Maples' chief extra-curricular endeavor on the job was stirring up dissatisfaction among the other route drivers over working conditions, overtime hours, pension funds and the like. The routing clerk didn't say the words leftist agitator, but Strowmeyer told Leschi he had read it in his eyes.

Three nights a week, Maples fed his mind with a sort of patchwork education taking night extension courses at the university, mostly theoretical mathematics and political philosophy of every bent under the sun. With the result that his mind had become a sort of storehouse cluttered with conflicting odds and ends, which made him a mental giant among people of below-average intelligence, but a mental misfitted midget among those whose intelligence was average or above. He wore a beard and often shuffled around the darkened campus in jeans outfits and sandals, even when it

rained. Further, Strowmeyer's surveillance during the evenings revealed Maples might be furtively dealing in drugs, which would explain how he could afford the semi-opulence of Forty-o-five. He wandered into too many university district bars and coffeehouses to be that thirsty or that hungry for intellectual conversation.

The last of the fivesome, Gardner VanDyne, was indeed situated beneath a limb of a money tree. His uncle was Horace Spellman, of Spellman Shop 'N Save Discount Drugstores, nine locations, plus flower shops and nurseries. Leschi drove out to see him at his sprawling home and grounds in the city's exclusive Blue Ridge district, where he was indulging himself on a putting green just off a spacious patio.

"My sister's boy," he explained idly to Leschi as a gold-bladed putter failed him miserably at the longer lengths but did him passing justice at the shorter. "Both his parents died in a plane crash nine years ago, when Gardner was sixteen. He lived here with me the next two years, after which I tried to move him into a management position at one of my stores."

"He didn't work out?" asked Leschi.

"Never got the chance," said Spellman. "The retail clerks union screamed nepotism and they were quite right in raising their collective bargaining voices. Up to then, my people had been promoted from the ranks for garden store managers and assistant managers and hardwares, prescription drugs, house paints, et cetera. They threatened to strike. My district managers and administrative people saw it as a pretty drawn-out messy situation, with Spellman chain outlets losing a lot of customers to our competitors in the process. So I backed down."

"What about Gardner?"

"Had to start at the bottom and work his way up. He lasted exactly three weeks in the fertilizer department of one of my nursery stores, Bellevue district, I think it was. He lost a lot of money in a supposedly friendly poker game with a few of the store's personnel, including the assistant manager, threw a few punches and got himself fired by the assistant manager. Probably best for everyone concerned. He wasn't showing up for work all that regularly and he was a true believer in nepotism in business. What could I do, Lieutenant Leschi, I ask you?"

"What did you do?" Leschi asked.

"I took care of the boy,

naturally. As I promised his parents I would do. I got him into both private and public colleges, sent him to Europe, got him his equipment and a midtown garage when he said he wanted to do art work in steel."

"And nothing panned out for him?"

"Just a question of finding himself, as far as I'm concerned. So what if he's twenty-eight and a pro at false starts? They were all late-bloomers on my sister's side of the family."

"And does he come here to visit often?" Leschi asked.

"Once a month. To pick up his check. Five hundred a month may seem like a lot of money to hand out to a grown-up kid with no direction. . . .but I promised his sister. Sometimes he calls and I line him up with a little work at one of my stores. Stocking, shelving, inventory, delivery, that sort of thing."

"Has your nephew been by to see you lately?"

"What is it, the twenty-sixth? No, not this month yet. Last day of the month. Picks up his check, has a little lunch, a swim. Then he pushes off." The black beetle-brow eye brows now furrowed darkly for the first time. "The kid, he isn't in any real trouble with you people is he? I recall reading in the papers about a killing out at Forty-o-five, the apartment complex north of town. Gardner lives there, at least he did up to last week."

"We're just making routine inquiries, Mr. Spellman," Sam Leschi told him, declined an invitation to lunch and left.

"THAT PUTS TOGETHER like plans for a bicycle with parts for a boat," young Strowmeyer said to Leschi an hour later over cups of coffee at a pizza parlor several blocks from Forty-o-five. "Spellman tells you he sees his gadabout nephew only on the last day of every month, and yet he knows where the kid was living as recently as last week. And my surveillance of Gardner VanDyne has him driving out to his uncle's place Monday afternoon, Tuesday night, Thursday afternoon and evening and again this morning at three a.m. There's more distance between two fence pickets."

"What about the kid's movements the rest of the time?" Sam Leschi asked.

"Lunches at restaurants where they wouldn't let you and me in the back door to check the kitchen for pack rats. Bars, cocktail lounges, stops at townhouse apartments, the athletic club. He played golf yesterday afternoon at Meadow-

brook Country Club. He finished six holes and packed it in. What gets me, how does he make it on five hundred dollars-a-month from his uncle with all that high living, plus a two hundred dollar-a-month pad, plus a stereo get-up strictly off another planet, plus that Porsche?"

"What about the car. You check it out?"

"Gardner paid one thousand dollars down. His payments are one hundred and twenty-six dollars a month and he's hit eight of them on the button. Dressing the way he dudes up, and hitting all the posh spots he does in a twenty-four hour day, it's hard for me to visualize how he does it without mirrors or credit cards."

"I've already checked into that part of it," Sam Leschi said to Strowmeyer. "Credit bureau says he's applied for every conceivable type, but when they checked the kid's work record, you could have heard the laughter into the next block. Ergo, no credit cards."

On the way back downtown, Strowmeyer brought up still another curiosity to frustrate them. "This kid hangs out at all of these blue-chip addresses, and yet for friends he chooses this small circle of phony wash-outs. You must admit, Sam, those are very questionable preferences."

"Admitted, But why?"

"We turn that, and we get all the applause."

"Applause, but no bonus," said Leschi.

"Rich beats poor by a mile, so why hang out with poor?"

"Aye," said Sam Leschi, with a Shakespearean flourish, "there's the rub."

The phone call came through to Homicide while the two were bruising their minds over all these unrelated elements, elements about which the other detectives in the department were now beginning to rumor that Leschi and Strowmeyer —the past-prime old man and the out-of-his-league punk kid—wouldn't recognize a crime or a clue if one of each were to jump up on the bridges of their noses and introduce themselves.

But the phone call seemed a hairline break in all the mystery. It was from Tula Graham, the goodtime husband-hunter who collected hotel soap in lieu of promises of marriage. Leschi took it, while Strowmeyer listened in on an extension.

"You aren't the detective I talked to the Monday after Julius Evans was killed," said the skeptical voice.

"No, I was," interrupted Strowmeyer, cutting in on the

extension. "Was there something you wanted to tell us about Evans' death?"

Tula Graham seemed to recognize Strowmeyer's voice now. "Yes. First of all, you're having us followed. Elwin Maples says all of us are being followed. He told me he spotted someone on the campus last Wednesday night who followed him to and from his classes. And later, up and down University Way."

"You're all still suspects in Julius Evans' murder, if that's what you mean," Leschi broke in.

"Well, if you're having me followed, I don't need all the aggravation," said Tula Graham. "It was Gardner VanDyne who killed Julius Evans. Shot him across the card table that afternoon in Evans' apartment."

"Tell us what you know about it," said young Strowmeyer, in a reassuring tone.

"We were all playing a card game, starting about midnight on Friday. It was a three-card game called Fits. I'd never played it before and I'll never play it again. It's the most greedy and ruthless card game on the face of God's green felt earth."

Strowmeyer interrupted. "That's the game where each player is dealt two cards and then tries to fit a third card between the range of the first two."

"After your first two cards," explained Tula Graham, "you can bet any amount of the pot or all of it. No money changes hands between the players. You simply bet against the pot. If your third card doesn't fit, you lose your bet to the pot and the next player bets his cards. The game continues that way around the table, player to player, until the pot is empty."

"Only on the afternoon Julius Evans was killed," Sam Leschi prompted, "the pot was fast becoming the heaviest place at the table."

"I've never experienced anything *like* that afternoon," came the gush of Tula Graham's voice. To Sam Leschi, its gambler's ecstacy was merely the sad echo of countless others he had heard, where ecstatic utterings for cards or horses or dice replaced those previous used to express feelings of love. Sam Leschi knew of no humans whose lives were more loveless than those of the alcoholic and the chronic gambler.

"Please go on, Miss Graham," he heard his young partner say now on the extension line.

"Well, anyway, no one was winning that pot in any sizable amount. By three o'clock Saturday afternoon, we'd been at it over fifteen hours and

there had already been a couple of near fist-fights and brawls over bottom-dealing and short bets and things like that.

"At this point," Tula Graham went on after a deep breath for air, "someone counted the pot and neated it up a little. I mean, it was really a potpourri of a pot. Cash, checks, money orders, two gold rings, Julius Evans' wrist watch he'd bought in the army, and at least four I.O.U.s. We figured it out to be around four thousand dollars.

"Then Gardner, that fancy-pants bastard, hit an ace-deuce."

"Which meant," Strowmeyer interrupted, "he could only lose with another ace or deuce."

"There had been a few others before this one," said the girl, "but perverse miracles struck every time and all the hands were paired up on huge bets. Well, he had a rule. If you went busted, you had fifteen minutes to get up a bet or you had to drop out. You could call a friend, leave the apartment, anyway you wanted to work it, just so long as you were back with a checkbook or a ring, or something the rest of the players would accept as negotiable. By this time we'd offered I.O.U.s. Small I.O.U.s are one thing. But a piece of paper with three figures and a signature on it always have a habit of being good enough to get you a cup of coffee. If you've got fifteen cents to go with it."

"So Gardner VanDyne was sitting on a virtual winning hand and left the apartment to scrounge up a little wherewithal to take a giant bite out of that pot," Sam Leschi said.

"Wherewithal, all right," said Tula Graham. "He came back with. . ."

At this point Tula Graham's voice broke off. Leschi thought he heard a door open and close in the background.

"Gardner!" came the astonished woman's voice when it next broke out across the line. "Don't be a fool on top of being a leeching bastard, as well. This is the police I'm talking to on the phone. You may as well put the pistol away because I've told them nearly everything. Gardner?. . ."

Leschi's head snapped toward Strowmeyer. The young detective was already breaking the connection and getting in touch with the unmarked patrol on surveillance at Forty-o-five. "Right. Unit-57, three or four hamlets down from the Evans' apartment. The man with the pistol is one of the suspects, Gardner VanDyne."

So far no shots had been fired, but Tula Graham had put down the telephone receiver and nothing was coming across the line but muffled voices. The

wait seemed interminable. Then a shouting voice identified itself as a police officer and ordered VanDyne to drop his pistol.

"No shots," Sam Leschi said, across the desk to Strowmeyer.

"My favorite kind of arrest," Strowmeyer replied.

THEY TOOK reasonable care driving back out to Forty-o-five. Dusk made for poor visibility and besides, Leschi had it all in place now and so there was no need to rush.

Sam Leschi watched the kid's eyes itching for some explanations. He'd have to ask first. That was the pure joy in being one jump ahead of the kids.

Presently, Strowmeyer cleared his throat. "I think I know why one of them broke. A thing like a wholesale charge of conspiracy to murder can make a lot of skin crawl. One thing, though. Why did VanDyne draw down on Julius Evans and kill him?"

"Because Evans beefed over VanDyne's winning that last big pot in the game," Sam Leschi said, his body beginning to get that warm feeling all over, the one it always got when he knew he finally had a sure grip on a case, right down the line to the end. "Remember, they'd been playing fifteen solid hours and there was over four

thousand dollars in the center of the table waiting to be claimed."

"VanDyne left to get money to bet," said Strowmeyer. "Left Evans' apartment and went to his own. He had nearly an unbeatable hand and he knew the cards couldn't run bad forever, so he'd want to bet as much as he could lay his hands on, the entire four thousand dollars if he could. But where was an out-of-work, adult ward on an uncle's dole going to get that much money in fifteen minutes? Drive out to his uncle's place in Blue Ridge? That's fifteen minutes *one way.*"

"It goes back to a lot of little things I didn't nail together in the beginning, either," Leschi said. "Until I started to paint the uncle into the middle of the picture."

"Spellman?"

"If he'd kept to the truth where the truth wouldn't have hurt him, that picture would have hidden him like the animal hidden in the clouds. But he lied about seeing his nephew only once a month. And when a suspect's caught in a big lie, you can bet there's a pretty good reason for it, and one that isn't all that honorable. You hit part of the nose yourself when you wondered what Gardner VanDyne was doing hanging around the G.P.s when he spent his days at the golf club, posh restaurants and townhouses with exclusive addresses."

"Or vice versa," said young Strowmeyer. "If he was such a loser himself, with the in-crowd at Forty-o-five, how could he be accepted in the social register set?"

"Let's look at that card game a minute," Sam Leschi said. "What did Gardner VanDyne have worth four thousand dollars he could get to in fifteen minutes, bring back to Evans' apartment and use as collateral for betting into that big pot?"

For a minute Strowmeyer gazed out the windshield at freeway traffic. Then the palm of one hand came down with a smack on the dashboard. "That Porsche automobile! Of course. That must have been it. All he'd have to do was signed over the title and throw it into the pot."

"Try again," said Leschi, as he shot them onto the north suburban freeway exit for Forty-o-five.

"Not the car," came Strowmeyer's deflated voice.

"Before you can open a locked door," said Sam Leschi, "you need the key. The key, son."

"The key."

"The key to all the seemingly insignificant things. Gardner VanDyne's frequent visits to

his uncle, his constant movement among the social register group and yet being shunned by them at the same time, like a case of plague."

"And the reluctance of any of the five suspects to come forward in the beginning and name VanDyne as Julius Evans' killer?" said the young man, tentatively.

"That's part of the key, too," Sam Leschi told the kid.

"And the four thousand dollars VanDyne was able to pony-up to win that card game, which upset Evans, which got him shot?"

"Part of the key, too," said Leschi.

"But that Porsche was the only thing Gardner VanDyne had worth four thousand dollars," young Strowmeyer persisted.

"No, he had something else. Something worth easily that much and something a poker table would support. Let me throw in one more hint and if it doesn't dawn on you then, Strowmeyer, you may as well resign yourself to spending the rest of your detective's life in the dark."

"Okay. . .one more hint."

"Try this on and see if you like the fit," Leschi told him. "Spellman Shop 'N Save Discount Drugstores, nine locations."

In young Strowmeyer's naive blue eyes, the dawn finally arrived like thunder. "That's what VanDyne had to bet," came the astounded voice. "Drugs. What kind? Heroin?"

"Or hash, or cocaine, or pills."

It was all downhill from there. And young Hollis Strowmeyer's tone ran like a kid shooting down a snowhill on his Flexible Flyer sled. "His uncle was in touch with the clients. Businessmen, doctors, financial people, local politicians. And he had the supply of drugs to feed his blue chip monkeys."

"And a nephew to run them. On golf courses, in the restrooms of posh restaurants, in the privacy of midtown apartments and suburban homes. What is suspicious about a rich man's nephew rubbing elbows with the social register set? Nothing at all."

"I get it now," said Strowmeyer. "He couldn't socialize with them. Everybody hates his drug pusher, hates him for what he's done to them. He is associated with only to get drugs and pay for them. That's the same reason nobody socialized with the small circle of G.P.s at the Forty-o-five, or why they themselves didn't mix with the in-crowd. And the same reason none of them blew

the whistle on Van Dyne when he killed Julius Evans that afternoon."

"Right," Sam Leschi said. "Junkies, every last, lonely one of them."

"Evans must have gone a little berserk when he saw VanDyne sitting on that huge pot with an unbeatable hand," said Strowmeyer. "And when VanDyne came back to the game and bet four thousand dollars worth of drugs, Evans must have gone even more berserk. VanDyne might just as well have waved those drugs under Evans' nose and then taken them away from him."

"The others kept quiet about the killing for one other special reason, I think we'll find out. To blow the whistle on VanDyne would not only have cut them off from their source, but it would have jacked up the price elsewhere."

"VanDyne was buying friendship by dealing them drugs at a cut-rate price," anticipated Strowmeyer. "Then he used that leverage to buy their silence about the killing. We've opened up quite a can of worms, here. Think Maples is dealing on campus for VanDyne to support his own habit? And maybe Carl Lind, the mechanic, as well? At bars and taverns?"

"Maybe even Tula Graham, to help all the lonely people pass their nights. It's all pretty ugly, I grant. But we'd better be prepared when it all goes down that way."

They reached the front gate of Forty-o-five. The same gate guard recognized them from before and passed them through with a wave. They entered the courtyard.

"Yeh, that's the whole way it will go down," repeated Leschi, his voice now a little wistful. "We'll keep hammering away at VanDyne, maybe dangle the possibility of a reduced sentence for the murder charge under his nose. But we'll crack him, Strowmeyer, my boy. We'll crack him like a thin-shelled walnut and we'll get his little black book of addicts and we'll nail his uncle high on the wall right along with him. Then we'll get the uncle's source and supply and any other pushers he's got hiding in his expensive woodwork and we'll get all the little people in between."

Sam Leschi had been at this business all too long to blow through his hat about his work and young Hollis Strowmeyer was already beginning to sense that about his new, old warhorse of a partner.

Because less than six months later, that was precisely the way it all went down.

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Please print JUNE, 1974

The Memory Game

by

SYD HOFF

She was always nagging him about forgetting things, but why did she send him to the well?

"BY THE WAY, I happened to run into that invalid neighbor of ours from back in Elkhart today," Mr. Lindbach said conversationally, across the kitchen table one evening. "The one who lived next door to us twenty years ago."

"Mr. Popper? How was he?" Mrs. Lindbach asked, her face brightening.

"Topper," he countered quickly.

"Popper," said his wife. "Melvin Popper. And we didn't live next door to him twenty years

ago. It was fifteen. We've been living here in this farmhouse ever since your fiftieth birthday."

"I was only forty when we moved here," said Mr. Lindbach, bristling. "I remember one of the boys from the plant remarking that 'Life begins at forty,' during our housewarming."

"I made that remark, and I was trying to be funny," said Mrs. Lindbach. "There couldn't have been anybody here from the plant because you were unemployed at the time we had that party. But then, you can't remember *anything* anymore, can you?"

"That's not true! My memory is as good as it ever was! In fact, it's better than yours will ever be, much better—"

"Listen, Will, don't argue with me. You know perfectly well that lately you'd forget your head if it wasn't tied to your shoulders. Anyway, when it comes to people, places and dates, I was always much better at remembering those things than you. The trouble is you should have kept on working. The minute you retired, you started getting absent-minded."

Mr. Lindbach was speechless. Then he saw by the calendar on the wall that it was the twenty-eighth of the month, and it came back to him—that is, part of it did.

"At least I'm not the one who gets absent-minded about a rent receipt," he jeered.

It was his wife's turn to be at a loss for words and, watching her face, Mr. Lindbach chuckled. He knew what she must be thinking; that in three more days, on the first of the month, Mr. Grimes, their landlord, would be dropping around. The landlord was an unscrupulous fellow who might easily try to collect an extra month's rent if they couldn't prove they didn't owe him.

"Haven't found it yet, eh, Martha?"

He knew perfectly well she hadn't. The rent receipt was tucked away in an upstairs bureau drawer, precisely where he had hidden it a week ago.

"Don't know why my misplacing something should strike you so funny," said Mrs. Lindbach, vexed. "If only we paid by check like most folks, instead of cash, there'd never be any problem."

Mr. Lindbach hurried upstairs while she busied herself with the dishes. Hiding that rent receipt had been an ingenious idea on his part. Now when his wife chided him for a lapse of memory, all he had to do was ask her where it was.

He pulled out the bottom

drawer of his bureau and groped among the socks, underwear and other articles of clothing.

The small piece of paper wasn't there.

Mr. Lindbach emptied the entire contents of the drawer on his bed and still couldn't find it. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. Could it be that he had put the rent receipt in the *top* drawer?

He went through the entire bureau without success, then turned to a large walk-in closet where his wife kept countless memorabilia on the shelves, in neat manila envelopes, or tied with ribbons, some of it even pre-dating their marriage.

The rent receipt was not among them. Had he, somehow, put it out in the garage, or in the tool shed?

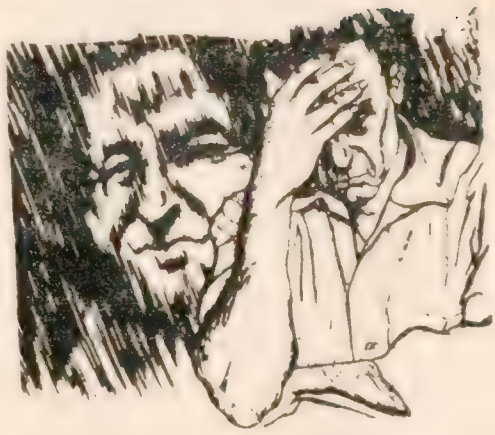
"Come on down, Will," his wife was calling from below. "Look what's on—an old, old film."

They sat in front of the television set, on opposite sides of the living room and Mr. Lindbach waited. The contest usually became tensest now.

"Oh, I was crazy about him," said Mrs. Lindbach, "Horton Sherman—he used to be my favorite actor."

"Thornton!" shouted Mr. Lindbach. "*Thornton* Sherman!"

She ignored him.



"Thornton! Thornton!" he repeated.

"I suppose next you'll be telling me that isn't Pauline Bickford," said Mrs. Lindbach, looking straight ahead.

"No, it isn't," said Mr. Lindbach, his heart beating faster. "Her name was Pickford. Pauline *Pick*ford."

"You're thinking of Mary Pickford," laughed Mrs. Lindbach. "America's sweetheart, the golden-haired girl of the screen."

"Don't tell me what I'm thinking! My mind is perfectly clear! It's yours that isn't!"

Mrs. Lindbach rocked in her chair. "If I had your mind, goodness help us. This house would go to pieces."

"Oh, it would, would it?"

"Yes, it would. Now, please be quiet. I'm trying to enjoy the movie."

Her husband had to get in

one more dig. "Don't know how a person can enjoy anything when she can't remember what she did with a rent receipt."

"I'll find it. I'll find it."

"Bet you won't."

"What's that you're saying?"

"I'm saying I bet you won't find that rent receipt."

Mrs. Lindbach turned to him, suspiciously. "What makes you so all-fire sure?"

"I'm just sure, that's all."

"See here, Will Lindbach, you haven't been up to something, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then suppose you leave the worrying about that rent receipt to me. If you're not interested in watching this picture, go on outside and have a look in the well."

"The well?"

"Yes, you heard me."

Mr. Lindbach scrambled to his feet, not sure what was expected of him, but afraid to ask.

"And don't *do* anything, Will. I swear, lately you're a caution."

He went outside, but still couldn't remember what was so important about the well. Hadn't they stopped using it since the city began piping in water to the rural areas, a year ago?

Or was it *two* years ago?

Mr. Lindbach pushed aside some wooden planks and stared downward into the inky depths. What a wife! Sending him out in the cold to see nothing, absolutely *nothing!*

Going back towards the house, Mr. Lindbach tripped over an object on the ground. He struck a match. It was an old ax of his. The steel head had a dark, wine-colored stain. Heavens! He hadn't killed a turkey with it since last Thanksgiving!

Mr. Lindbach left the ax lying there and hurried back inside the house, sat through the rest of the program in silence. Suddenly he wished his chair was nearer his wife. He felt scared without knowing why.

The news came on. "Dear," he called to her. "I—"

"Hush," she said. "It's the President."

The man speaking didn't look at all like FDR.

"How about a nice cup of tea before retiring?" asked Mrs. Lindbach when it was over.

He followed her into the kitchen, watched her put a light under the kettle.

"As usual, you forgot something," she said bitterly.

Mr. Lindbach tried to think of what it could be.

"The television. Go shut it off."

He came back from the living room, mumbling. "Just see that

you remember where you put that rent receipt before Mr. Grimes gets here."

Mrs. Lindbach stared at him. "You absent-minded old fool. Did you forget that, too?"

"Forget what?"

"Mr. Grimes came here today and we threw him down the well."

"We did?"

"Of course. Land sakes, I don't know what's going to become of you, Will Lindbach."

"You—you mean Mr. Grimes is dead?"

"After the way you hit him with that ax, it would be a miracle if he wasn't."

Mr. Lindbach sat down and scratched his head. "I guess I *am* getting forgetful."

His wife set two cups and saucers on the table, and smiled. "Maybe my mind isn't what it used to be either. Look, I forgot to keep the calendar up to date."

She went to the wall and tore off a few pages. "Now if I could only find that rent receipt," she said, bringing the steaming kettle. "You know how I like to keep old papers and things."

Mr. Lindbach sat sipping his tea and wishing he could help her find it. Then she joined him at the table and they both sat sipping and remembering as much as they could.

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BULLETS DON'T BOUNCE

The killer had followed in his footsteps and now Reyes had to track him down or take the rap himself. It would be easy — if the killer didn't catch Reyes first . . .

by PAUL W. SILVER

MEN HAVE always had to be hunters and fighters by nature, in order to wrest sustenance and comfort from a hostile earth. Early men found it necessary to operate in tribes; later men established villages that became towns that became cities that grew up tall and spread out far.

And cities are like proud, glittering ladies with rotten hearts. Somewhere in the heart

of any city is a place where ruined men get trapped, a place they call skid row.

The city of Los Angeles has a street called Wall Street, so named long before it became skid row. A good many of the people who wind up there came from distant places with big plans and shiny dreams. Even in Los Angeles, sometimes, plans don't work out, money and hopes evaporate, and Wall Street is where losers go to wait it out, and watch their dreams hurtle away like a train.

I myself had visited Wall Street on occasion, but I wouldn't want to live there. Now I was there again, suddenly as a private eye. I still wasn't ready to move in, but looking for a young movie star who apparently was.

He wasn't a star for long. His name was Whitey Harrison, and he'd just made it to the top of the Hollywood heap when he disappeared like smoke. Some said he'd lost his mind, though few even noticed he was gone.

A man who did notice phoned me one evening, telling me he was Whitey's father, and that he was worried. I told him I wished I could help, but he wanted the police, I was only a security guard.

"I know, Mr. Reyes, I read about you in the paper," replied the man, who called himself Oscar Harrison. "But the story said you were once a private investigator."

Harrison was referring to a story about me in that afternoon's paper. Early that same morning I had gunned down two men trying to steal the hundred thousand dollars I was being paid to protect. This had made me the recipient of a valor citation by the Los Angeles police, a one thousand dollar reward by an insurance company, and fame; and a belly full of butterflies I was still trying to drown in whiskey when Oscar Harrison called.

"I didn't last long as a private investigator," I told Harrison.

"Maybe you were too honest," said Harrison.

"So that was it. You want to hire me to find your son?"

"Yes I do. We haven't heard from Whitey in six months, and I have reason to think he was involved with thugs."

"What reason?"

"Letters he wrote to us," Harrison said. "The letters stopped last May. My wife and I finally decided to come here to look for him. We're from New York. Anyway, we found Whitey's things had been moved out of his apartment and put in storage, the place rerented. He hasn't been there in

six months. We'll pay $500 to have him found, but we want someone who's trustworthy and knows how to handle himself."

"Five hundred is a lot of money," I said.

"Our son is worth more than that to us."

Mentally, I added $500 to the thousand I already had. It came up a nice nest egg. "Where are you staying?" I said.

"We're downtown at the Hilton."

"I need a night's sleep. Would tomorrow morning be O.K.?"

"Fine," he said. We made an appointment at the hotel for nine a.m. Then I thanked him, he thanked me, and we hung up.

So I dug out my private license, which was still good, and my detective special fedora hat, which was too small. Either it had shrunk or my head was getting bigger.

OSCAR HARRISON was six feet or close to it, with a lean, lopsided face and baggy eyes. His hair was silver and wavy. His cleft chin was the only place he resembled the handsome Whitey Harrison.

Mrs. Harrison was small and nondescript, and wore glasses and a worried expression, her brown hair in a bun.

I sat in the couple's small suite listening to Harrison talk of Whitey's triumphs in high school and college productions back east, and of his exodus to Hollywood. In Hollywood, Harrison told me, Whitey knocked around for a year or so, bragging in his letters about his acquaintance with sinister gamblers and jet-setters.

Then, suddenly, Whitey was a star. The letters stopped, and Mr. and Mrs. Harrison followed their son's brief success story in newspaper entertainment pages and gossip columns. Oscar Harrison frowned:

"Then, all of a sudden, Whitey's name was out of print, the film he was starring in was scrapped, and. . .you probably know the rest as well as we do."

I knew what everybody who read the L.A. papers knew, which wasn't much. The movie Whitey was to star in, "Ocean of Storms," had been suspended and finally scrapped because of its leading man's mysterious illness. Gossip mongers bandied the rumor that Whitey Harrison was in a mental hospital. Without confirmation, the rumors soon died and Whitey Harrison was forgotten.

Mr. and Mrs. Harrison sat there gloomily, and I said, "How old is Whitey?"

Mrs. Harrison, speaking for the first time, said, "He's twenty-seven."

"Not too old to be a star," I said. "Probably he wasn't prepared for all the pressure. Too much ruthless competition out here, and then if you make it, the pressure really starts. Whitey probably couldn't take the strain, then got a little nervous about going home a failure."

The Harrisons still looked anxious. I continued: "I wouldn't worry too much about thugs and gamblers. Hollywood isn't as wild and lawless as you've heard."

That seemed to relax them a little, and Harrison went on to tell me what he knew about Whitey's connections in L.A., and, at the end of the interview, provided me with a snapshot of Whitey and an envelope containing money.

"Cash?" I said, hefting the envelope.

"We thought you'd prefer it," said Harrison.

I shrugged. "I haven't earned it yet."

"In a way you have. By making us feel better."

"That makes me feel better," I said, and pocketed the money. I told them I'd phone in later, and they were smiling courageously as I left.

It took me fifteen minutes to drive to Hollywood, and find Marquee Company, the talent agency that had handled Whitey. Oscar Harrison had given me the name of a Mr. Bergman, the man who had represented Whitey personally. Marquee Company was located in one of the newer, shinier office buildings along Sunset Boulevard.

Down in the building's basement garage I squeezed the car into a parking space, and caught an elevator to the twelfth floor. The carpet in the twelfth floor corridor made me want to lie down and go to sleep, but I plowed down it and up to a glass door that had "Marquee Co." lettered on it in phantasmagoria. On the other side of the door was a desk, sitting at the desk a flashy blond who looked like someone there between takes.

"Hi," she said to me.

"Hi," I replied. "My name is Felix Reyes. I would like to see Mr. Bergman."

"Do you have an appointment, Mr. Reyes?" she asked me earnestly.

"No ma'am."

"One moment," she said, picking up a purple telephone and dialing three digits. "Mr. Bergman," she said into the phone, "there's a Mr. Felix Reyes here to see you."

I heard a faint, metallic reply, and the girl rested the phone against her audacious bosom and asked me politely

what my business might be.

"I'd like to talk to him about Whitey Harrison."

"He'd like to talk to you about Whitey Harrison," the girl repeated. Bergman's answer was short. The girl hung up and pointed down the hall: "Last door to your right, Mr. Reyes."

I winked at her. She winked back.

I found Bergman's door open, and walked in. The office was all business, except for the posters and pictures of famous stars covering the walls. The two chairs in front of the desk didn't even match. On the desk a nameplate read, *H. Elmer Bergman*, and behind it sat a short, square, bald-headed man with horn rim glasses. Behind him a tinted picture window looked north across Sunset Boulevard and into the Hollywood Hills.

Bergman stood and shook my hand solidly, saying, "Good morning. Have a seat."

I sat. He offered me a cigarette from a box, I turned it down, and he lit it himself. "Mr. Reyes, is it?" he said.

"That's right."

"What can I do for you?"

"I understand you were Whitey Harrison's agent. He's disappeared and I'm trying to track him down."

"Are you a detective?"

"That's right. Private," I said.

"Who hired you?"

I gave him a mysterious smile and Bergman stared back at me. "What gives?" he said.

"I'd rather not say who hired me. Want me to leave?"

"Nah, forget it. Yeah, we handled Harrison, till he flew the coop on us. He said we weren't doing him any good."

"He broke with you before he got big, then?"

Bergman exhaled smoke forcefully, saying, "Yeah, he landed that big role with National Cinema on his own. Don't ask me how."

"You had nothing to do with it?"

Bergman shook his head.

"Did he go to another agent?"

"Nah, he didn't like agents. The feeling was mutual. Harrison was independent as hell, thought he had enough talent to make it by himself. I told him he was nuts, nobody could make it in this town without an agent." Bergman shook his head again. "Then he gets that part right away, and he blows it." He looked at me interestedly. "So he got lost?"

I nodded. "Did Whitey have a nervous breakdown?"

"I guess that's what you'd call it. They were shooting that 'Ocean of Storms' epic, and Harrison didn't show for a scene. This is what I heard

anyway. He was in his dressing room, stiff as a board, staring at himself in the mirror. They had to pry him out of there and lead him away.

"Where'd they take him?"

"Up in Elysian Park, some private hospital. He walked out, I heard. And that was the last I heard." He regarded me moodily through clouds of smoke, then leaned over and meticulously stubbed out his cigarette. He looked bothered about something.

I said, "What's on your mind?"

"Huh? Oh, I don't know, just that I didn't think Whitey was the type to go to pieces. He was pretty steady, I thought."

"Even though he ran out on you?"

"Aw, you know these hotshots. We weren't moving him fast enough to suit him. Hell, we were doing our best, I told him, but he wouldn't buy it."

"But you didn't have him figured for a nut?"

"Hell, no. I knew he had that star quality." Bergman looked over at the movie posters on his wall. "I had big plans for him, but he wasn't patient enough."

"I wonder what made him blow his top. Was he on pills or something?"

"I don't know. I doubt it."

"Who was his love interest?"

"I don't know that he had one. Himself, probably." Bergman looked at his wristwatch.

"Okay," I said, taking the hint. "Couple more questions. Did Harrison have any close friends I could talk to?"

"Mitchell Drake was his drinking buddy."

"Mitchell Drake, huh?" The magic had not gone out of the name of one of the big box-office draws of a decade ago. But Drake was out of sight now, and had been for years. According to rumors he'd become a bottle-baby. I asked Bergman if the rumors were true.

"Yeah," said Bergman. "Drake was a real lush. He was giving Whitey lush lessons. Then he had the accident."

"What accident?"

A distant look came over Bergman's face. "Drake ruined himself. Must have been smoking in bed. Drunk. Anyway there was a fire and Drake got burned, and scarred pretty bad. One eye's blind. He'd been talking comeback, too."

"How come I didn't read about that in the papers?"

"It wasn't in the papers," said Bergman.

"When did it happen?"

He thought a moment. "March, I guess. Eight months ago."

"About the time Whitey cracked up?"

"Whitey's crack-up came a couple months later." Bergman and I watched each other.

Then I said, "That's show business, huh?"

"That's show biz." He was looking at me as though he expected me to get up and leave.

I stood up and shook his hand again. "You've been very helpful, Mr. Bergman. Do you happen to remember the exact name or address of the place they took Harrison?"

He stared down at his desk, massaging his bald head. "Elmgrove," he said at last. "I don't know the address."

"You didn't visit him, then?"

"No," said Bergman. "Should I have?"

"Don't ask me. Any chance of my talking to Mitchell Drake?"

Bergman gave a short laugh. "You could get an audience with the president easier. Drake's turned into a hermit."

"Who's he married to?"

"No one." Bertman was back at work, rummaging through papers on his desk.

"Okay," I said. "Thanks again."

As I turned to leave, Bergman said, "You're not going to tell me who's looking for Whitey?"

I said, "His parents would like to know where he is."

He looked at me to see if I was kidding him. "They would?" he said. "That's where I thought he'd be—back home."

"He isn't," I said, waving as I left.

The receptionist was too busy filing her nails to notice me.

Half out of the glass door, I waited patiently, and she finally looked up. I winked. That put a little smile on her lips which tried to get bigger. Then she winked back.

ELM GROVE was a nursing home on North Figueroa, according to the phone book. I made the six mile drive east on Sunset, then turned left on Figueroa and climbed the rugged little hill called Elysian Park. Practically in the shadow of Dodger Stadium, I found Elmgrove hiding among trees, a two-story structure of weathered-brick that looked like somebody's residence. A scripted sign above the wooden door assured me I was in the right place. There was a doorbell, so I rang it.

After a minute, the door was snatched open by a tall woman in a nurse's uniform. She had a bony face and shocked, spinster eyes that stared at me as though I were a madman looking for a home. The woman didn't say anything, so I immediately said, "Yes ma'am. My name is Felix Reyes." I showed her my license. "I'm trying to find an actor named Whitey Harrison."

"He's not here anymore," she said, continuing to eye me with clinical curiosity.

"Uh huh," I said. "Do you happen to know where he might be?"

"I'm afraid not," she said, and sounded sorry. Then, unexpectedly, she stepped back and said, "Come on in. I suppose you want to ask some questions."

I followed her in. The place smelled and looked like a hospital on the inside, well-lit and immaculate. We walked down a hall and past a room, once a living room, that was now a lounge where tired people with troubled faces stared with tired eyes at nothing.

She showed me into a small office, saying, "Please have a seat in there, sir, and I'll be with you in a minute."

I sat on an old, cold leather couch, feeling way out of my element. Depression seeped from the walls of the place, and it was catching. I wondered what kind of road led from New York to Hollywood to Elmgrove. I looked out the window at my left shoulder, which gave on a lawn covered with fallen leaves, and watched sparrows jump in brainless joy.

Then my nurse came back and took up position behind a battered, antique desk. She introduced herself as Miss Fromm, the head nurse. I asked her when Harrison had checked in and how long he had stayed. She determined from a file fold-

er she removed from a drawer that Harrison had been admitted on May seventeenth and had departed on June thirtieth of this year.

"What was his trouble, Miss Fromm?" I asked.

"Nervous fatigue, we call it. A common thing in Hollywood."

"I see. Do you get many Hollywood people here?"

"Oh yes," she said proudly. "We have one here right now. I can't give you the name, of course."

"Uh huh. So I guess you meet all kinds of famous people?"

"I meet my share, yes." Underneath the starch, Miss Fromm was star-struck as any teenager. I asked her if she might remember any visitors Whitey had had, knowing she'd remember all of them.

"Mr. Harrison didn't have many visitors," she said hesitantly.

"But he had some?" I prompted.

"Well, there was Mr. Bob Andrews of National Cinema. He brought Mr. Harrison here, and then came back the next day with some of Mr. Harrison's things."

"Anyone else?"

Miss Fromm's expression had espionage all over it. "Only one other," she said in a loud whisper. "Enzo Crawford was here."

I blinked, taken aback, which satisfied Miss Fromm. "Crawford came to see Whitey?" I said. She touched her lips conspiratorily and nodded.

I could understand her slightly exaggerated secretiveness. Enzo Crawford was an old-fashioned hood who was involved in more than his share of shady enterprises, and it seemed that he and his corps of lawyers were always one short step ahead of the law. He owned a hotel-casino operation in a town called Oasis across the California border, which is where he would normally be found. I wondered what brought him to a place like Elmgrove.

"Mr. Crawford was only here once," Miss Fromm went on. "Just before Mr. Harrison left. He brought flowers."

"That was nice. Did he stay long?"

"No. Mr. Harrison wasn't feeling good that day. He wouldn't talk to anybody."

"Uh huh," I said absently. I was trying to work Crawford into the scheme of things, and beginning to worry about Whitey.

Miss Fromm said, "It was funny. When Mr. Crawford's wife stayed here he didn't visit her once."

"Oh? When was she here?" Crawford's wife was famous

too, but for being a comely little actress named Cheryl Daufin.

"Miss Daufin—or should I saw Mrs. Crawford?—stayed here about this time last year. I probably shouldn't be telling you all this. How do I know you're not a writer for one of those fan magazines?"

"Take my word for it, I'm not."

She blushed and gave me a sly smile. "I know you're not. I saw you on the news last night. You're the one who stopped that holdup attempt over at the airport. I recognized you right away."

I nodded graciously, saying, "You're very quick, Miss Fromm."

"Where's your uniform?" she asked me.

"I don't wear that anymore. I'm a private eye now."

"Oh." She tittered. "I've never met a private eye."

I didn't tell her I'd never been in a nuthouse. "Yes. Well, to get back to Whitey Harrison, he didn't mention to anyone where he might be going?"

"No. He just packed and slipped out without saying anything to anybody. We don't lock the patients in. We're not a jail."

"He didn't pay his bill?"

"National Cinema paid the bill."

"Uh huh. What did Whitey talk about while he was here? Didn't he talk about future plans, what he was going to do next?"

"He didn't say anything to me." Her brow wrinkled. "Except. . ."

"Except what?"

"Well, he said that now that he was finished in Hollywood, he was going to make it big on Wall Street, or make a killing on Wall Street, or something." Miss Fromm smiled.

I didn't smile. "It was intended as a joke, I guess?"

"Well, he didn't laugh. But I'm sure he meant it sarcastically."

I was assuming he meant it that way too, but the remark stuck. It was the only lead I had.

Nodding vaguely, I turned to gaze out the window. Miss Fromm sat quietly, waiting for me to ask more questions. My thoughts fastened on Enzo Crawford, gambler and thug, big horse-faced half-breed in black suit and homburg. He and Elmgrove didn't mix. Not in any way.

I said, "You told me Whitey left right after Crawford visited him. How long after?"

Miss Fromm looked worried. "Now that I think of it, I believe it was that same night."

Which figured. "Might any-

one have heard anything they said to each other?"

"No; they were upstairs in Mr. Harrison's room. As I told you, Mr. Crawford was only here a few minutes, and Mr. Harrison hadn't said a word all day."

"Do you know if Enzo Crawford has anything to do with National Cinema?"

"I don't really. He certainly might. He's very diversified."

Diversified; the word had a legitimate ring, so it didn't fit Crawford. But I was betting he owned a chunk of National Cinema. His wife was one of their big promotions.

I said, "About Crawford's wife. You said she stayed here?"

Miss Fromm nodded and said, "Yes."

"Nervous fatigue?"

She nodded again, then added incidentally. "This is where she and Mitchell Drake first met."

My turn to nod. "Drake stayed here too?" I was wondering if there was a rocket to stardom that hadn't passed through Elmgrove.

"Yes he did," Miss Fromm said. "Mitchell Drake had a drinking problem, which is no secret to anyone. Then Mr. Drake met Miss Daufin here, and they became good friends, and seemed to help each other. Of course, after they left here you read everywhere that they were having a love affair, which I personally think was baloney. They were just friends."

I said, "This was all before Drake's accident?"

Miss Fromm nodded glumly.

I turned to watch the sparrows play. It was a scene I could understand. Then I said, "You told me Whitey was here until June thirtieth. When exactly was he last seen and when was he missed?"

She thought a minute. "He was here at dinner, as I remember. Then he went up to his room. I guess that was the last we saw of him. He wasn't here for breakfast."

She looked vague.

"He took all his belongings with him?"

"Yes, what little he had."

"Who did you notify when you found out he was missing?"

She took out the file folder again and took a business card from the folder, saying, "I called this Mr. Andrews." She handed me the card, which said Robert Andrews was a public relations man at National Cinema. I copied down the phone number on the card and returned it to Miss Fromm.

I was all out of questions. Somewhere else in the little hospital a woman had begun weeping, like a lost child. The

world is too big; I knew that. It's easy to get lost.

"She's being taken care of," said Miss Fromm.

I must have had a worried look on my face. I wanted to get out of Elmgrove. I stood and thanked Miss Fromm for her time, and she accompanied me to the front door and watched me go, looking as though she wanted to keep me.

I walked back to my car and got in and drove away and found a pay phone, where I dialed the number I had taken down. But Andrews knew nothing or wasn't talking. "What did you do," I asked, "when you were informed Whitey was missing?" He said he hadn't done anything, Harrison wasn't their problem anymore, and if I'd please excuse him, he had a luncheon appointment. Then he hung up on me. I banged the phone down and went and had lunch myself.

THE TWO BEERS I had for lunch must have stimulated my imagination. I got to thinking over Whitey's remark about Wall Street, and had my big hunch. I drove downtown, hell-bent for skid row.

I've got friends on Wall Street. I stood at the corner of Fifth and Wall, having parked my car on Spring Street and walked the rest of the way. The street sign was missing from the corner. Undoubtedly someone had pawned it.

I knew where I was anyway, it being siesta time, with winos splayed one or two to a doorway, and the Sky Blue Cafe caddy-corner across the street. The Sky Blue Cafe was actually a beer bar. I knew a man who lived there.

The man's name was Philly, once a class welterweight who won his first eighteen pro fights, then lost his nineteenth. The guy that beat him went on to take the title and held it for three years. Philly found himself a bottle and held onto it even longer.

Philly was there when I walked into the Sky Blue Cafe, peering at me curiously over an empty beer glass. I was conspicuous in my business suit. As I came closer he recognized me, and when I sat down next to him at the bar, his black face broke into a toothless smile.

"Fancy Felix!" he said, laughing gutturally.

I slapped the bar to wake up the bartender, saying, "Bring Philly another beer."

Philly said, "What're you doin' here, Fancy Felix?"

"I'm looking for a movie star."

He stared at me in tipsy wonder, then laughed again.

I took out the snapshot and

showed it to him. "This is the guy I'm looking for."

Philly looked at the snapshot only briefly, saying, "Ain't he cute?" The bartender had brought the beer and Philly finished it in two gulps. I signaled the bartender to bring him another.

Philly belched, then glanced at the photo again. "C'mon jelly-belly," he said. "You're pullin' my leg. Hey, you still soft in the belly?"

I pounded my midsection. "Feel that. Hard as a marshmallow."

He leaned over and threw a left jab into my stomach. I tried to smile.

Philly laughed loudly. "You still can't take it down there! That's what finished you!"

"No one ever touched my face," I lied.

Philly nodded. "Yeah, you was hard to find, all right." He gave me a pink, nostalgic smile, then bubbled over into laughter. "I sure was surprised to see you walk in here! I thought you was still on the deck from the time that Panamanian caught you!"

"He got me below the belt," I lied again.

"Ha ha ha ha! You musta been wearin' your belt around your neck!"

We both laughed for a short minute, for as long as we could

stand to think about our vanished glory. Then Philly's mood changed and he took off his smile and hid it away, like someone dismantling and storing a make-believe Christmas tree. His gaze traveled to the haughty face in the snapshot lying on the bar.

I said, "You're sure you haven't seen him, Philly?"

"Nah. What would a guy like that be doin' down around here?"

"I don't know. You were kind of a star yourself once."

He gave it some thought and nodded, going back to his beer. I stood, gripping his shoulder by way of farewell, then picked up the photo and walked to the other end of the bar.

I paid for the beers and

showed the snapshot to the bartender. "You see him?" I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I think I seen him around Doug's up on Sixth."

I walked away feeling old and empty, up Wall Street one block to Sixth, passing crummy liquor stores and a half-dozen walled-up, abandoned shops. I got panhandled twice and kept walking both times.

At Sixth Street I looked left and across the street saw a tattered awning with "Doug's Hotel" lettered on it. Under the awning was a window displaying a sign that read, "Rooms $2." I crossed the street and yanked open the weather-warped door to Doug's Hotel, and went in.

The lobby was overheated and smelled of dust, and had a bare wooden floor. Along the peeling walls stood several crumbling sofas, and each sofa contained a sleeping bum. Other bums occupied folding chairs arranged in front of an obsolete television. The set was high on a shelf, away from drunken hands, and its tinny voice made the room seem even lonelier.

The clerk at the desk was watching T.V. too. He tore his eyes from the screen and contemplated me. I put the snapshot in front of the man. "I'm looking for him," I said.

"Why?" he said in an uninterested way.

"He ran away from home. His folks are looking for him."

He looked at the snapshot and shook his head. "I ain't got no memory for faces. Long as they pay their rent." His eyes and mind drifted back to the television set, as if it held the answer to life.

I took out a $5 bill and laid it on the counter. "Will this help?"

He hardly looked at the bill. "Help who? I told you, I got no memory for faces."

I turned around and began scanning the lobby for someone who looked as if he might be able to recognize a photo for what it was. One of the men had risen from a sofa and was standing by the street door. He looked sleepy and hung-over and hungry. He made a faint motion with his head toward the street, and then followed me as I walked out of the lobby.

"Was that a $5 bill I smelled?" he wheezed.

"Sure was." I handed him the bill and the snapshot.

He started nodding. "Oh yeah," he said. "I know him. He's got a beard, though."

"Where is he?"

He showed me his rotten teeth, then held up the bill. "You got any more like this?"

"If I give you another five you'll drink yourself to death."

"I've tried that. Never done it yet."

I reluctantly gave him another five.

He jerked his head back toward the hotel. "Try Room Ten," he said. Then he stumbled up the street as fast as his legs could carry him.

I went back through the lobby past the unseeing eyes of the desk clerk and creaked up a flight of stairs. Turning down a dark, narrow hallway, I stopped at the first door to my left. It had a "10" tacked to it. I knocked on the door and heard the sudden squeak of bedsprings behind it, as if I'd jolted whoever was inside awake, and he wasn't expecting visitors.

"Who is it?" said a voice behind the door.

"I'm looking for Whitey Harrison."

"Blow," said the shaky voice.

"I'm a private detective, Whitey. My name's Felix Reyes. Open up, I want to talk to you."

"Go ahead and talk," said the voice.

"Open up. What're you afraid of?"

Silence; then a lock slid back and the door opened an inch. I already had my wallet out, opened to show my license, and held it up to the door about eye height. The room was dark and I couldn't see in. The voice said, "What do you want?"

"C'mon Whitey, let me in. I'll come in with my hands up. You can frisk me."

More silence; I stood there patiently. Then the door opened and I went in, my hands held high, still holding my wallet. He unbuttoned my coat and shook me down with one hand; his other hand held a switchblade knife. He found no weapons on me.

"What do you want?" he repeated.

"Can we get some light in here?"

He reached over and slid open a pair of dirty curtains in front of a dirtier window. Light struggled in. The room unbelievably small. It had a door and a window and a bed and a wash basin full of dust; and Whitey Harrison.

He'd changed. His hair was lank and oily brown, no longer light blond. He'd grown a beard, and there were black circles under his eyes. "Now tell me what the hell you want," he said impatiently.

"Your folks hired me to find you."

He guffawed without mirth. "Okay, you found me. Bye." He shifted restlessly, as if racked by mysterious pain, a wild, haunted look on his face.

"Boy, you're in bad shape," I said.

"Thanks. Who asked you?" The voice cracked and trailed off. Suddenly he dropped the knife and pitched face down, weeping, on the bed. I stood there surprised. He sobbed for a long time, as though he'd been saving it for an audience.

I waited helplessly for the sobbing to stop. When it did, I said, "What the hell's the matter with you, anyway?"

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling, hands clasped at his chest like a laid-out corpse's. He said quietly, sniffing, "I got spoiled by success."

I snorted. "You got more than spoiled. You got wrecked. What's this all about?"

He turned to look at me. The face looked about twice as old as it should have. "Do you really care?"

"Sure."

"What really is your angle?"

"I told you, your parents hired me."

"Oh get lost."

I didn't get lost. I reached down and picked up the knife, folded it, and threw it on the bed next to him. "Who are you afraid of?" I said.

"Everybody." He sounded tired of talking.

"You had it made. What happened?"

"Yeah, I had it made. I was a star." He looked at me contemptuously, as if he knew more than I ever would. "Nobody's got it made, buddy." He flicked open the knife and looked at the blade. "Mitchell Drake had it made."

"Drake was a pal of yours?"

He didn't say anything, just stared desperately at the knife blade.

I said, "Was Enzo Crawford another of your pals? Is he the guy worrying you?"

He turned to me with a faraway look. "All I did was put a pill in his drink," he said faintly, as though I'd accused him of something.

"Whose drink? Crawford's?"

"Sharkey did it!" he whispered violently.

"Who's Sharkey? What did he do?" I said, getting concerned. Whitey's eyes had taken on a crazed glint.

"Sharkey!" he said, as if the word meant a pestilence. He slapped his hands over his face and turned toward the wall.

I stood there dumbly. After a minute, Whitey said in an urgent tone, "Go away!"

I said, "Whitey, you need help." He made no reply. "You can't stay here," I said.

He didn't answer me. He wouldn't move.

I left him there. If life was an ocean of storms, then I was just

a poorly stowed vessel at its mercy. If wisdom was cargo, then some of mine was tugging at its lashings, breaking loose. I drifted out of Doug's Hotel.

I PHONED Oscar Harrison from my apartment. He wanted to know how I'd found Whitey so fast, and I told him about my hunch. I also told him it might be best to leave Mrs. Harrison home if he went to Doug's hotel, and that I wanted to give him at least half of his money back. But he wouldn't hear of it at all. "Five hundred was the bargain," he said.

It wasn't worth it. Whitey Harrison's tortured face had been carved into my memory. I kept telling myself men don't get that way without a good reason. The businesslike half of me answered I wasn't paid to care about the reason.

I didn't sleep much that night, with my mind still belaboring some invisible enemy. It was well after midnight when I dozed off, and five in the morning when I awoke again. I tossed and turned for a couple hours more, then at 7:30 got up and fixed a pot of coffee and plugged it in. I never drank a drop.

I had opened the front door and stood on the porch, the chilly morning air trying to chase me back inside. Down at my naked feet was the newspaper, rolled and bound like a fat stick of dynamite. On its curved surface I could see part of a familiar face. My heart started banging as though it wanted out.

Slowly, I bent over and picked up the paper and popped the string. The headline said in letters big and black, "MOVIE STAR SLAIN!"

They had found Whitey Harrison in Room Ten with his throat cut wide.

I sleepwalked back into the living room clutching the paper as if it were a dead animal. The news story was short, and I had just gotten to the part where it said police were looking for an unidentified man in a gray business suit who had called on Whitey Harrison yesterday afternoon, when the doorbell rang.

The two men at the door were plainclothes detectives. With treacherous courtesy, they asked to be let in.

"Sure," I croaked. I indicated the newspaper on the couch. "I just read about it."

"Uh huh," said one of the detectives, making himself comfortable in a chair.

The detective's name was Roger Thornton, and I knew him slightly. He was a cagey old veteran cop, a two-hundred pounder with curly gray hair

and a seamed face. His partner was a brisk, clean-cut type who said his name was Glick. He started poking around immediately. He opened my closet and asked what I'd been wearing yesterday. I showed him my gray suit, and he took it out and examined it, then laid it on the back of a chair.

"Shoes?" said Glick.

I pointed to my black shoes. He looked them both over thoroughly and put them with the suit. Before he asked I went and got the rest of my clothes. Glick put everything roughly on the chair.

Then he went over to my desk and looked through my wallet, afterwards tossing it to Thornton. When nothing else on the desktop excited Glick, he started opening drawers. He found my envelope right away. It was still sealed. Glick held the envelope up to the light. "How much?" he asked me.

"Five hundred," I said.

Glick threw the envelope at Thornton and went off to search the other rooms.

Thornton also held the envelope up to the light, played with it a bit, then slipped it into a pocket. He lit a cigarette. "What you been up to, Felix?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"Where'd you get the money?"

"A man named Oscar Harrison paid me to look for his son."

"Where is this Oscar Harrison?" said Thornton, and the doubt in his voice made my blood run cold.

"At the Hilton," I said.

"You got an extension phone?"

I nodded.

"Go call him," he said, and moved over by the living room phone.

I trudged into the kitchen like a condemned man and dialed the hotel on the extension. Glick was there and noted the number as I dialed. Thornton listened on the other phone.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harrison has checked out," said the hotel operator.

"Give me the desk, please," I said. I waited, and the world seemed to swerve, going somewhere without me. A man's voice said, "Reservation desk." The voice told me the Harrisons had checked out yesterday afternoon, leaving no forwarding address.

I went back to the living room. I needed a drink, and said so.

"Go ahead," said Thornton.

I went and poured myself a straight bourbon and took it back to the couch. After Id tossed off the drink, I said: "I went to Whitey's room yesterday at about 2:30 in the afternoon. I

was only there ten or fifteen minutes. Then I drove home and called this Oscar Harrison. He must have checked out right after I called."

Thornton looked at me penetratingly. "So this Oscar Harrison claimed to be Whitey's father?"

"Right."

"That's another one on you. Whitey Harrison was only the kid's professional name. His real name was Harold Hawkins."

I got up and poured myself another stiff one.

"You're a chump, Felix," said Thornton after I sat down again.

I squeezed my eyeballs. They were vibrating. "They used me for a finger man," I said. "I told this Oscar Harrison where Whitey was, and he must have gone over and killed him."

"Why?"

I couldn't think of why. I shook my head. "When did they find Whitey?"

"Last night about ten. Where were you?"

"I was here, alone. What time do they think he got it?"

"He hadn't been dead an hour when they found him. And I'm supposed to be asking the questions."

I leaned back against the couch headrest, trying to relax. Thornton took out a black notebook. "You own a switchblade?" he said.

"No, but Whitey did. He held it on me when I went to visit him."

"Take it away from him?"

"Why? Were my prints on it?" Thornton wasn't talking. "He dropped it," I said. "I picked it up and closed it and threw it on the bed."

"What made him drop it?"

"He was half-gone in the head. He dropped the knife and fell on the bed and started crying like a baby."

"Before or after you cut him?" I let that go by. Thornton, doodling in his notebook, went on: "Did Whitey tell you someone was after him?"

"Not in so many words. But he acted like he thought someone might be. I thought he was just crazy." And I'd thought wrong. It was going to take me time to live it down.

"He should have hid better," said Thornton.

"I don't think he cared what happened to him. He was almost to the strait-jacket stage. They got him with his own knife?"

"Maybe. How'd you happen to bump into this guy who called himself Whitey's dad?"

"He said he read about me in the paper. He must have looked me up in the phone book." I told Thornton about my meet-

ing with the so-called Harrisons.

When I finished telling him, Thornton said, "Why would they pick on you?"

"I've been wondering the same thing. Maybe he figured I'd be less suspicious of him than an established dick."

Whoever Oscar Harrison was, he couldn't have known what made me the perfect chump, all too eager to believe a kid's parents would travel across the country and spend five hundred dollars to find him. My own parents had been too poor and unhappy to care whether I died or disappeared or flew to the moon.

Thornton said, "You didn't smell a rat when they gave you cash?"

I shrugged. Maybe I did, but the smell of money was stronger. I said, "I was greedy I guess. I always wanted to be a Hollywood private eye, pulling in those big fees."

Thornton just looked at me. Glick, who had finished his search and was leaning in the kitchen entrance, looked at me too.

I said, "Yeah, I know, I'm a chump. But I wouldn't cut a guy's throat for money and you know it."

Glick said, "What we think doesn't matter. The D.A. would love this set-up."

I said: "That's what it is, a set-up. I'd have to be a lot stupider than I am to kill a guy at a place where I'd been seen and stuck out like a sore thumb, and then go home and wait for the cops to come get me, without even hiding my payoff money. Besides, you said Whitey got cut around nine last night. I was there early in the afternoon."

Glick smiled implacably. "You could have gone back later, disguised as a wino."

"I take it no one saw anybody beside me go in to see Whitey?" Neither cop answered me. "That's probably what the killer did," I went on. "Wandered

in just like any other wino. How'd they discover the body? Noise?"

Thornton shook his head slowly. "A human holds a lot of blood," he said. "Some of Whitey's leaked under the door."

I felt sick. I could have saved Whitey, if I'd been smart. I said, "Was his lock forced?" Both cops stayed silent. "Maybe Whitey killed himself," I offered. "I told you he was out of his head."

"Huh uh," said Thornton. "Nobody cuts their own throat with a rusty switchblade." All three of us thought it over.

Then Thornton stood up, saying, "I smell coffee."

"Help yourself," I said.

"I guess I'll have a cup too," said Glick. They went into the kitchen and talked in low voices for a while.

Then Thornton came out of the kitchen, holding a steaming mug, and took his old seat. Glick drank his coffee leaning in the kitchen door. Thornton smacked his lips, put the mug down, lit another cigarette.

"Give us a good description of the couple at the Hilton," he said.

I described a face I wasn't going to forget: "Oscar had a long, bent face, baggy eyes, ruddy complexion. Cleft chin." Ugly as hell, I thought. "He was about six feet and lean. Silver hair. The woman was ordinary-looking, short, in her late forties or so. Glasses. Brown hair. They were both good actors."

"They had a good audience," said Thornton, and reached into a pocket. He took out a photograph and flipped it at me. I looked at it, and got a chill. It was Oscar, wearing a tux, a cruel gleam in his eyes. His mouth frowned at the world.

"That's him," I said. "How'd you happen to be carrying this?" I gave the photograph back to him.

Thornton just sipped coffee. "Ever hear of Lloyd Sharkey?" he said.

"Whitey said that name." I remembered the look of horror in Whitey's eyes. "He said it like he didn't like it."

"What did Whitey say about him?"

"He just said 'Sharkey did it.'" Both cops looked at me skeptically. "That's really all he said," I went on. "He wouldn't say what he did. He clammed up after that."

Thornton looked at me hard for a long time. Then he tapped the photograph, saying, "This is Sharkey. We know he's in town, or was, anyway. We don't like him."

"That makes three of us," I said.

"The whole department doesn't like him," Thornton went on. "He's an Oasis hood. We got our own hoods."

"Click. I'll bet he works for Enzo Crawford."

Thornton nodded. "How did you know?"

"Played a hunch. Whitey knew Crawford." My mind was busy blending facts. I didn't like the soup they made. It bubbled, smoked, and stunk, and was the color of spilled blood.

"Sharkey runs Crawford's casino," Thornton continued. "Know what he does if he catches people cheating?"

"Eats them?"

"No, he just smashes their hands with a brick and sends them on their merry way."

"Uh huh."

"Know something else, Felix?" Thornton said shrewdly. "We don't think you killed Harrison. Or else you're a better actor than Sharkey ever was. Could anyone have seen you and Sharkey together?"

"No, just the so-called Mrs. Harrison."

"Think we could ever find her?"

"Probably not."

Thornton waved the photograph. "What do you think would happen if we showed this to people over at the Hilton?"

"No one would have seen him. I'd guess the woman did the checking in and out."

Thornton nodded. "Maybe. We'll do it anyway."

"Look," I said, "give me a chance to get even."

Glick said, "Sharkey would love you to come looking for him, Felix. We don't have to tell you he's mean. He might bounce a bullet off of you."

"Felix ain't Superman," said Thornton. He was right. Bullets don't bounce off me.

I gave them a miserable grin. "Can I make a few phone calls?" I said in my Superman voice.

"Sure, go right ahead," said Thornton.

He moved to the phone, and we followed the same procedure as before, with Glick noting the number I dialed on the extension, and Thornton listening in. They weren't about to trust me all the way, yet. Part of the reason I was off the hook as far as I was had to be the valor citation they had just given me. They couldn't go and arrest me for murder two days later, it would make them look bad.

When I finally got through the National Cinema switchboard, I said, "Andrews, don't hang up on me this time."

"Who is this?" said Andrews.

"Felix Reyes. I called you yesterday about Whitey Harrison. You didn't cooperate. You

probably know Harrison's been murdered. Now I've got some questions and I want them answered."

"What do you want to know?" he said, trying to sound unintimidated.

"First, does Enzo Crawford own a piece of National Cinema?"

There was a short silence. "As a matter of fact, he does."

"Thanks. And the part Whitey got in the 'Ocean of Storms' turkey—was someone else up for it before Whitey?"

There was no answer. I raised my voice. "Was someone else up for the part?"

"Yes. Mitchell Drake, as a matter of fact. . ."

This time I hung up on him. I stood there thinking, and Thornton said from the other room, "Well, professor?"

"One more call," I said, and started dialing. I recognized her voice right away. "Hi, baby," I said. "Do you remember Felix Reyes?"

Her tentative voice said, "Vaguely."

"Well this is him and I want to talk to Bergman again." She connected me immediately. "Hi, Bergman," I said. "Read the papers?"

"Yeah, Reyes. Why'd you do it?"

"Never you mind, Elmer. Listen, give me some information."

"I oughta have this call traced."

"Go ahead. I'm with the cops right now." I looked into the living room. Thornton was shaking his head at me.

"What do you want with me?" said Bergman.

"Give me Mitchell Drake's address and phone number."

Incongruous anxiety entered Bergman's voice. "Why do you want Drake?"

"Don't ask questions, Elmer, and use your head. Do you really think I killed Harrison? The guy who did is on the loose. He tried to frame me."

I listened to Bergman breathe. Finally he said, "Look, I can't take the chance of giving out Drake's address. That's it."

I sighed. "Okay, Elmer, I've got a better idea. I'll give you my number, you get a hold of Drake and tell him to call me. Say his life depends on it. Will you do that?"

He thought awhile. "Yeah, I'll do that."

"Thanks, I'll be waiting." I gave him my number before I hung up.

I went back into the living room and sat down, my thoughts moving far away. I crawled into another man's mind. It was like crawling into a grave full of worms.

Thornton waited patiently for

me to say something. Finally I said: "You didn't see Whitey before he died. He was miserable and desperate. Something was hounding him, not just Sharkey, something else he couldn't escape."

Thornton was listening. "What was that?"

"It was guilt. I know that now. Guilt had taken over his mind."

"What was he guilty of?"

"Impatience. He jilted his agent and found his own way to the top, and it destroyed him."

"Begin at the beginning, would you?"

I was at the beginning of a journey down a high mountain, where the cold wind of truth was blowing through me. I looked down on a world where the way the people savage each other makes their lives hardly worth living. I opened my mouth and the cold filled the room, and changed it, as a glacier changes the earth.

"Enzo Crawford is mean and unpredictable, and when all the gossip about Mitchell Drake playing around with his wife made him look like a patsy or worse, he pressed a button. He turned his monster loose, Lloyd Sharkey, a death machine fueled by cunning fury. Crawford pointed Sharkey at Drake. 'Make it look like an accident,' was all Crawford said.

"Whitey Harrison was Mitchell Drake's friend. Sort of. He was also putty in Sharkey's hands, a perfect ally. See, Drake was going to make a comeback in a new flick for National Cinema. Whitey was hungry and looking for a break. So Sharkey puts his arm around Whitey and says, 'You help me fix Drake, and maybe we pull a few strings and you get the part.' Whitey didn't think it over long enough.

"So Sharkey's got a perfect set-up. Drake's famous for being a drunk, and drunks are always blacking out, their memories full of holes. Drake would remember having a few drinks too many with Whitey, then the next thing he knows he's in bed and on fire.

"Yesterday when Whitey was raving he said he put a pill in someone's drink. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. He wouldn't explain. Now it's obvious he doped Drake's drink. When Drake passed out, Whitey probably let Sharkey in, then left. 'Sharkey did it!' he said. He probably didn't know what Sharkey had in mind, didn't care. Not then, anyway.

"So Sharkey put Drake to bed, then set fire to it."

Thornton's face was as white as his shirt. Glick stood popeyed in the kitchen en-

trance. I went over and poured three drinks. "Whitey managed for a few months," I went on, "then his conscience overpowered him and he caved in."

I distributed the drinks. "Enzo Crawford actually went to see him when Whitey was in a nursing- home called Elmgrove, I guess to tell him to straighten up and fly right, and keep his mouth shut. But Whitey moved out and into skid row, partly to hide, partly to do penance, I guess." I drank my drink. It felt good. I didn't want the good feeling to go away ever. I turned the bottle around and around on the bar.

I didn't pour myself another drink. I went back to the couch and sat down. I said: "But Whitey's only chance for sanity was to make a clean breast of everything. Which is what Sharkey was afraid of. He had to find Harrison, and silence him. You know the rest. Sharkey got someone to pose as his wife, went and checked into a crowded hotel where he wouldn't stick out, using the name Oscar Harrison, then found a chump to put the finger on Whitey. Then, for a flourish, he framed the chump."

Thornton cleared his throat. "Maybe Sharkey said he was you when he knocked on Whitey's door last night. Anyway, he got in without a fuss.

When Whitey saw Sharkey he probably froze. He was a sitting duck."

Nobody said anything for a while. Then I broke the silence: "I wonder if Drake ever put two and two together."

"What if he did?" said Thornton. "He couldn't prove anything. And now Harrison's mouth is shut for good." He paused. "Sharkey's clean as a whistle."

"Yeah," I said. "But he'd be a hell of a lot cleaner if Drake suddenly got fed up with life and killed himself, or accidentally fell down the stairs in a drunken stupor. . ."

That's when the phone rang. I went and answered it in the kitchen.

"Mr. Reyes?" said an older woman's voice.

"Speaking."

"I'm Mrs. Pettit, Mr. Drake's housekeeper."

"Oh. I'd like to talk to Drake."

"Mr. Drake never comes to the phone. I'll take a message."

"The message is get out of the house. Both of you. Is anyone else living there?"

"No, and what do you mean we've got to get out of the house?"

"You read about Whitey Harrison's murder?"

"Yes," quavered Mrs. Pettit.

"It's tied in with Drake's accident, only it wasn't an accident. Where were you that night, Mrs. Pettit?"

"It was my night off."

"Well the accident was set up by Harrison and another man. This other man murdered Harrison to keep him quiet. He wouldn't mind finishing Drake for the same reason." There was a faint gasp at the other end. "Will you do what I say?"

"Yes," she said in a frightened whisper.

I told her she'd just hired herself a bodyguard, and my fee was a dollar, to make it legal. She gave me the address. The house was off Wilshire on the west side of the city in an area called Knollwood. I told her to leave the house with Drake just after dark, and to avoid being seen, and walk down to the boulevard and take a cab to a hotel. I told her to leave lights on in the house so it looked as though they were home, and to leave a back door open. She agreed to do everything just as I said.

Glick and Thornton didn't want any more, but I poured myself another shot of bourbon when I finished talking with Mrs. Pettit. Thornton said, "It's flimsy as a kite, Felix."

"Maybe. Are you going to turn me loose?"

Thornton looked at Glick, then back at me. "Sure," he

said. "But don't leave town."

I laughed. "I won't."

It was damp and chilly in Knollwood and I could smell the sea. The time was 6:30; dinnertime. It wasn't mine.

I had my gun with me, and a flashlight, and gumshoes even, everything but my fedora. I'd tried it on again, trying to look tough, but it still hadn't fit, had fallen down over my ears like an empty trash can.

I pulled the car to a stop on Wilshire along the curb and strapped on my gun and grabbed my flash and started walking. I left Wilshire at Country Club Drive, which bordered a golf course.

The fog was thick on the golf course, and thick enough on Country Club Drive to make Mitchell Drake's mansion as vague as the future. I looked at the house through a gate in a brick fence, where it sat fronted by a rolling lawn almost as big as the golf course across the street. The house had a million windows and half of them were lit.

The gate was locked. I hadn't told Mrs. Pettit to leave it unlocked. I took a good look around me. The street was as empty as midnight. There were no trees big enough to hide behind, no parked cars. I was sure no one was watching.

I jammed the flashlight into my belt and vaulted the gate. Nobody shot me. I ran across the lawn, past the side of the house and into the back. The second door I tried let me in, and I shut the door behind me and locked it.

The house was still as a cave. It was too big to search thoroughly, but I looked in most of the rooms, finding nobody. Many of the rooms I looked in were stuffy and unused, some were empty of furniture. One upstairs bedroom looked lived in; it had to be Drake's. There was a pile carpet on the floor and a bed as big and as wide as a Broadway stage. On either side of the bed at the head were matching tables and lamps. There was a large draped window in the far wall that faced the street. Opposite the bed was a closet with a sliding door filled with rich clothes that Drake probably never used anymore.

I turned off the light in the bedroom, and went around turning off most of the rest of the lights in the house. I didn't want anyone watching the house to think there was a party going on. I wanted it to look as though Drake were spending a normal evening at home.

Downstairs in the living room I left the lights on, and pulled a chair against the wall

and sat there until eleven o'clock with a gun in my hand. During the long wait a grisly thought hit me for the first time: What if Sharkey had been here already? What if he was setting me up again? Fear touched me with her clammy hand, pointing down the road to panic.

I stood up, but I had nowhere to run. Besides, men like Sharkey work at night, I told myself. They do it quiet and they do it quick, so they can live and be free to keep on doing it. I knew Sharkey as well as I knew myself. And minute by minute I was discovering how little I knew myself.

But I had to stay there, and maybe learn a lot.

At eleven I flipped off the living room light and went upstairs to Drake's bedroom, and turned on the light in there. I crossed in front of the window a few times, letting my shadow fall on the drapes. I stuffed some of Drake's clothes under the blankets so it looked like a sleeping man, then pulled the table nearest the door out from the bed, three feet towards the door. That left a space between table and bed where a man could get boxed in in the dark. I turned off the lights.

I stood in the corner nearest the door, waiting. I had no idea how many hours had passed when I heard the sharp cracking sound from downstairs, but I recognized the sound, instantly. Someone with a glass cutter had punched out a piece of window.

I put my hand on my gun butt and the thumb of my other hand on the flashlight switch. I didn't hear any footsteps, I didn't hear anything more at all. He was so quiet, as he came through the door he almost surprised me.

I surprised him more. Just as he'd bent over the bed and realized what was in it, he heard me kick the door shut behind him. He whirled. My flashlight beam hit him in the face. I saw the grim, sagging eyes and angry mouth.

"Hi Sharkey," I said.

He squeezed his eyes shut, utterly blinded, and backed along the bed toward the trap I'd made. He stumbled over his own feet and fell back into the little alcove. Flicking the flashlight off, I moved toward the foot of the bed.

"You made a chump out of me, boy," I said. "I don't like that."

I wasn't supposed to be there. His gun went off like a howitzer, aimed at my voice. The bullet hit the flashlight and blew it out of my hand. I leaped like a frog, over the bed, landing on my belly between bed

and window. My gun was out and I aimed it under the bed at where I hoped Sharkey's upper body was and emptied it. He yelled loud and long.

But I knew he was a good actor. I sprang up onto the bed so he couldn't do the same to me, and rolled toward his side. I rolled right onto his hand with its gun, and froze.

I told myself there wasn't any sense in breathing, but I finally let my breath out anyway, and tried another. Then another. Sharkey never pulled the trigger.

After a while I got up and turned on the light and found out why. My six bullets had ripped him to shreds after all, and his right arm, his gun arm, was hanging by a thread. The fingers at the end of the arm were quivering like blue night crawlers.

I sat on the floor and had the dry heaves. I wanted to call the police but the phone was a long way away, three feet.

Someone else called them. They were hammering on the front door and I stumbled down and opened it. Two patrolmen stood there, wearing crash helmets, pointing their guns at me.

"What's all the noise?" one of them shouted.

I pointed upstairs. One patrolman went up, holding his gun in front of him like a talisman. The other stayed with me. He said, "What's going on here?"

"Call Thornton, homicide," I rasped.

"Nah, don't bother," said Thornton, walking in the front door. "Hi Felix. You look bad."

"You got here fast," I said.

"I live across Wilshire, with the poor people. I told them to call me if there was any noise in Knollwood. I take it our friend showed up?"

"I knew he would, Thornton," I said. "Christ, I need a drink." I grasped his hand and shook it, just to see if he was real.

"You been hitting the bottle awful hard lately," he said. He went upstairs to say hello to Sharkey.

I went all over the house looking for a drink, but I couldn't find a bottle anywhere. Either Drake had taken it all with him, or he was on the wagon.

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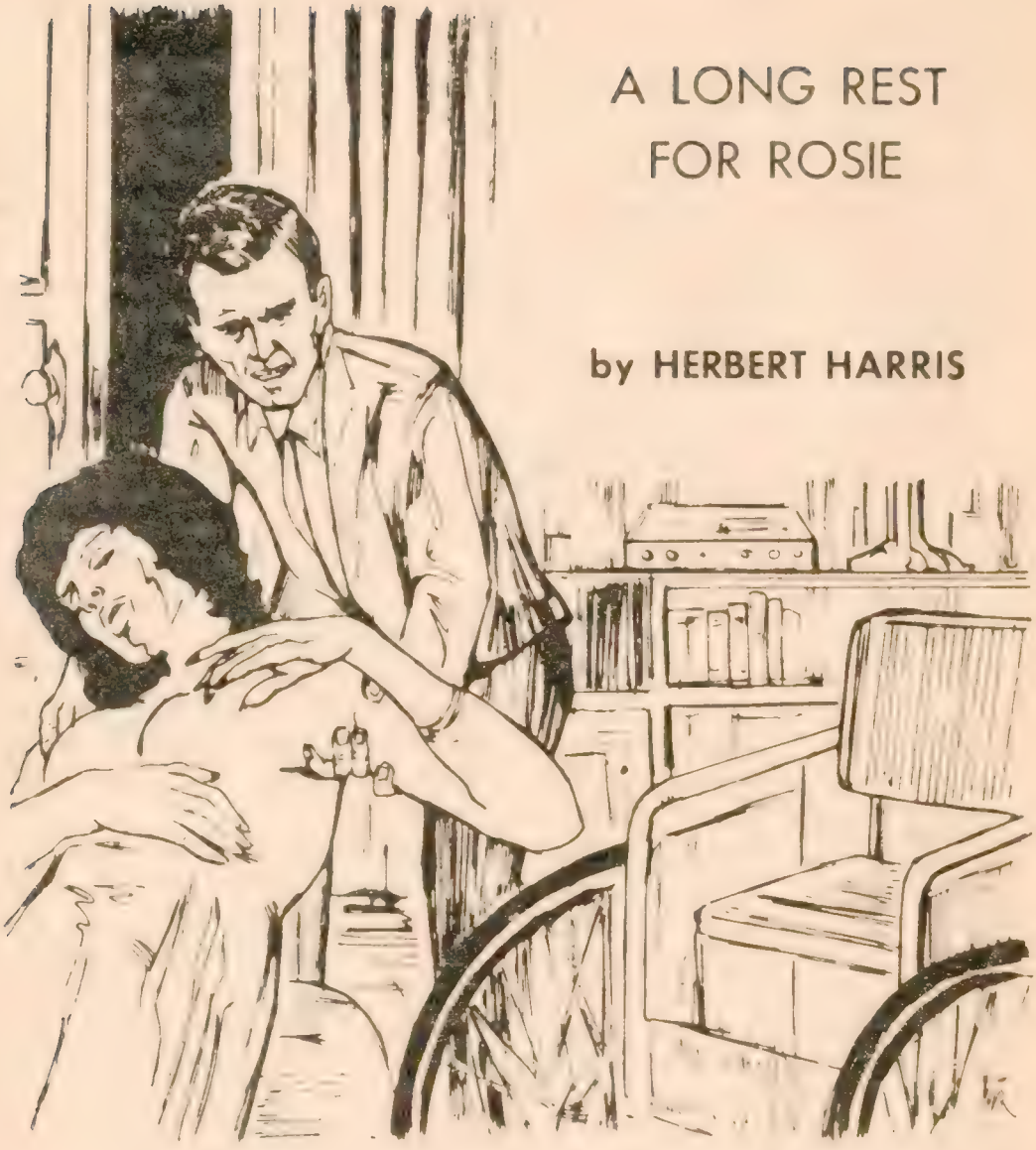
A LONG REST FOR ROSIE

by HERBERT HARRIS



Rosie had wanted to go on a vacation for years, to someplace exotic. What would be the harm in granting her one last wish. . .her very last?

STEPHEN CAWDELL stood on Elm Tree Hill watching the trucks spewing their tons of yellow clay into the great basin which had been gouged out of the ground.

It had been going on for several days now, and would continue for many days more. The gaping hole on the field had been left behind after the clay-quarrying,

but the brickworks had closed down. The land had been sold to developers, and the cavity was being stopped like a hollow tooth with tons of clay carted from a neighboring excavation.

As he watched the trucks backing up to the open wound in the ground and tipping their loads into it, Stephen Cawdell saw it as a giant grave. A grave many feet deep. A place for the rest he had planned for Rosie.

He had been rather too optimistic when he married the wealthy invalid. He had expected her to die quite soon. Unfortunately, she had lingered on interminably.

Rosie had told him often enough that she had nothing to live for. Would it not be almost a charity, then, to still that damaged heart of hers for ever?

Then, with the considerable sum of money she had bequeathed to him—"for the years you have had to put up with me, Stevie"—he could go away with Doreen, legalize their illicit relationship, and they could live like aristocrats on the interest from Rosie's money alone.

It was all so simple. All he had to do was to kill Rosie, place her in that disused quarry with a light covering of clay, and the trucks would do the rest for him next day. They would disgorge tons more clay on the top of her shallow grave, and soon Rosie would be buried many feet deep, like some prehistoric creature, too far down for any spade to bring to light.

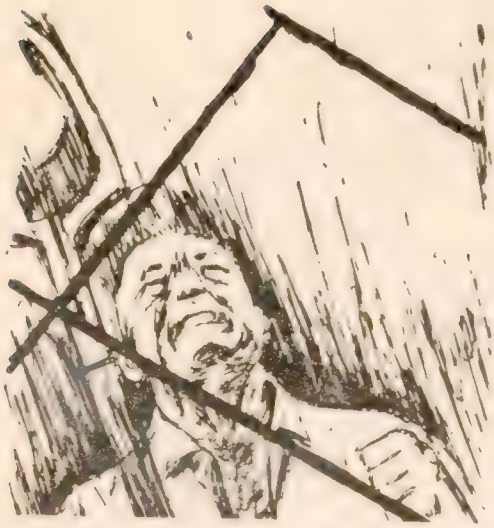
There would have to be a proper plan, of course—a plan as near foolproof as possible.

He brought his mind to bear on it. And a recent request of Rosie's came rushing back to him. "I wish that you could take me abroad, Stevie," she had said in her plaintive voice. "Some place where there's plenty of sunshine. Perhaps it might help me a little, you never know."

Slowly the plan took shape. He would agree to take Rosie abroad. Majorca or somewhere like that. Having obtained her passport, he would kill her and leave her in the quarry on Elm Tree Hill for the trucks to finish the job.

He would then remove her photograph from the passport and replace it with one of Doreen. He and Doreen would travel abroad as Stephen and Rose Cawdell. No difficulty there. His wife and Doreen were about the same age, the same build, the same coloring.

Within a short time he would write a letter home to his mother, signed "Rosie"—carefully copying Rosie's handwriting—saying how very ill she felt and what a strain the travelling had been and how she wished she had never attempted it.



The strain, in fact, would prove altogether too much. She would "pass away", poor darling. She would be "buried" abroad, and fairly quickly too, because of the hot climate, you know.

He would then return home as a widower to receive everyone's sympathy. Later, of course, Doreen would return home on her own genuine passport. And a little later still they could go away together—a long way away from that grisly spot on Elm Tree Hill.

BOTH CAWDELL'S mother and that friendly old Mrs. Simmons who lived next door to Stephen and Rosie's place thought it was a truly splendid idea for Rosie to go away for a change. To everyone else he knew, he pretended that the journey to a warm climate was being undertaken out of solicitude for Rosie's well-being.

But suddenly Rosie referred constantly to the awful responsibility he would have to shoulder in travelling abroad with an invalid. Her self-pity became so acute that it merely served to fan the flames of his hate for her. He almost looked forward to destroying her.

He disliked the idea of killing her while she was awake. He put off the unpleasant duty until he found her asleep. Under the influence of her sleeping-draught she looked half-dead already.

Rosie made no sound as he smothered her with a pillow.

In spite of the breeze that tugged gently at the skirts of the curtains, it was hot in Rosie's room. Cawdell realized that the effort had made his face shiny with sweat. He went and stood for a while at the window, which had been thrown open wide, allowing the cool air to caress his face.

Presently he dragged Rosie's body into the garage, by way of the back door, and placed it in the back of the car alongside a spade. The evening was dark and moonless as he nosed the car out of the drive into the lane and moved off in the direction of Elm Tree Hill.

Behind him he had left the light in Rosie's room full on. The light in the front porch burned too. Little touches, he felt, which

pointed to a very thorough mind.

He hauled Rosie's body into the bowl of the quarry by the path he had already earmarked, the least precipitous one. Even so, it was not a very easy operation. He worked as swiftly as he could, burying her in her shallow resting-place. Tomorrow morning, early, the trucks would come and finish the job for him.

When he got back to the car, he glanced at the dashboard clock. By the time he returned to the house, he would have been gone approximately forty minutes. Not bad going, he reckoned.

Of course, there was no prospect of getting any sleep. That passport-photograph needed attention. He would have to pack the two suitcases—one of them containing all the things which Rosie would normally have required for a holiday abroad.

He had told everybody that he would be leaving very early in the morning. He would depart at dawn, therefore. Nobody would be about at that time. First he would have to go and pick up Doreen. Then—as Mr. and Mrs. Cawdell—they would go to catch the boat. Carefully, methodically, he checked over a number of points as he travelled back to the house from the quarry.

AS HE TURNED the car into his drive, he became conscious of a figure standing on his doorstep, and his heart missed a few beats.

Then, in the light shining down on the porch, he recognized old Mrs. Simmons from the house next door. He silently mouthed a curse. It was pretty late for the old chatterbox to be calling, anyway. He must keep a completely cool head, though, he must say that Rosie was sleeping soundly and that she would have only a short night's rest in view of their early departure, and that she must not be disturbed at any cost.

But before he had finished getting out of the car, Mrs. Simmons had run in her flat slippered feet to the side gate which led through to his rear garden.

"It's all right. . .he's come back. . .he's here!" she called out to somebody who was not at present in sight.

Cawdell's heart began to thud against the cage of his ribs. And he stood staring as a police patrolman appeared out of the shadows.

"Hope you don't mind, sir," the policeman said, "I was looking for an easy entrance to your house. We arrived just a few moments ago. We tried knocking and I was just going to try to get in through the back door or a window."

"I didn't know what to do, Mr. Cawdell, really I didn't," Mrs. Simmons put in, her voice a shaky cackle. "I knocked and

knocked, but you'd obviously gone out, and I had no idea how long you were going to be. So I thought the best thing was to 'phone for the police."

The color had slowly drained from Cawdell's face, making him look tired and old. Struggling to maintain some semblance of composure, he asked: "But what happened? A burglar, or something like that?"

"No, sir," the constable answered. "The window of your wife's room looks out on to this lady's coal-bunker, as you may know. And apparently the window had been left open."

"Well?" The sweat on Cawdell's face seemed to be turning to ice-water.

"I assume, sir—and it's pure assumption—the note was blown off her bedside table by the breeze, was carried out of the window, like, and settled on top of this lady's coal-bunker. She went out for some boiler-fuel about half-an-hour ago, and found the note there."

"Yes, it was dreadful." Mrs. Simmons broke in again tearfully. "I felt that I had to do something to avert the tragedy if it was at all possible, Mr. Cawdell. Naturally the note was meant for you, but I. . ."

She broke off. The patrolman handed Cawdell a sheet of notepaper. By the porch-light, Cawdell read:

"My darling Stevie—I feel that I can no longer go on being such a terrible burden to you. I have taken a fatal dose of the sleeping-draught pills. It's the best way out for both of us. Thank you for putting up with me so patiently all this time. Forgive me. Your ever-loving Rosie."

He finished reading the note, but went on staring at it. So she had already been dead when he smothered her. Her goodbye note had been blown out of the window before he had entered.

"As a matter of form, sir," the constable said, "I'd be glad if you'd allow me to look at your wife. Though I don't doubt we shall be too late."

Cawdell covered his face with his hands. "Yes, too late," he said, "too late."

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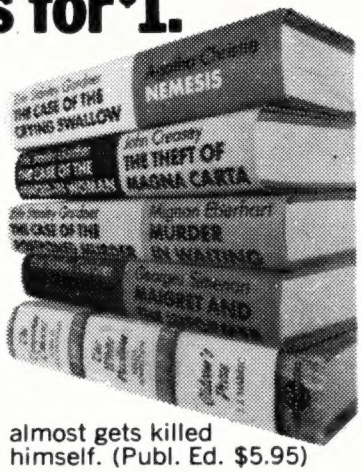

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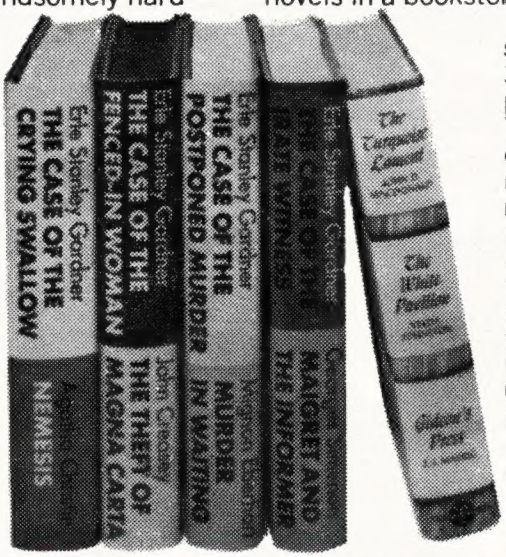

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